10th Anniversary

SF eye

AN INTERVIEW WITH
JACK WOMACK

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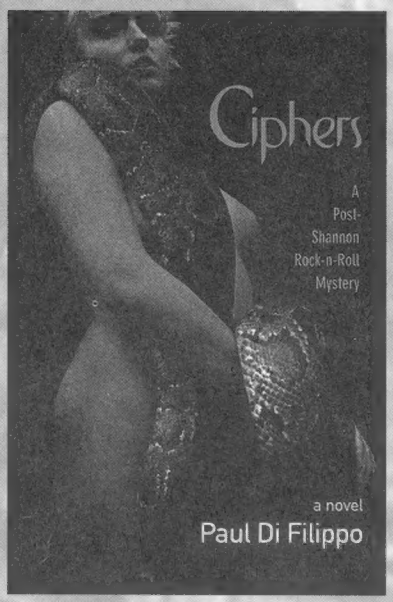

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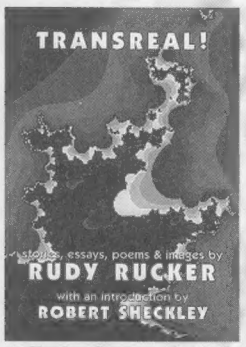

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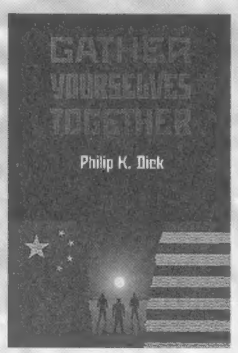

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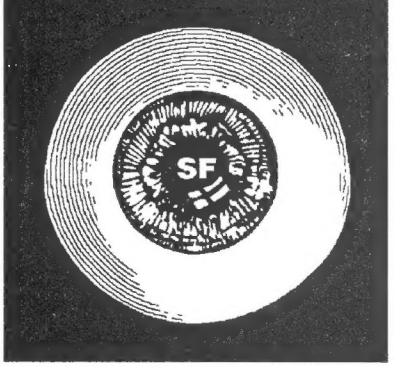

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CONTENTS

ISSUE #15 FALL, 1997

EYEDITORIAL **2**

RAPID EYE MOVEMENT **3**

TERMINAL LUNCH *by Paul Di Filippo* **10**
"The Last Laugh of the Mohicans"

CATSCAN *by Bruce Sterling* **18**
"Big Science—The Year in Review"

WRITING FROM THE BODY *by Nicola Griffith* **23**

DIALOGUES IN STAINED GLASS AND SILICON **29**
by Eugene Mosburg

GRAFFITI'S RAINBOW *by Takayuki Tatsumi* **33**
"Panic Japanesque"

HOW TO BE A PEDESTRIAN IN IRVINE, CALIFORNIA **38**
by Julia Witwer

JACK WOMACK *Interviewed by Stephen P. Brown* **45**
(Interspersed with William Gibson Interviewed by Jack Womack)

JACK WOMACK AND THE HORNED HEART OF NEUROPA . . **61**
by William Gibson

SELECTIONS FROM THE WOMACK COLLECTION **62**

DROWNING THE KITTENS or, The Repo Man Cometh **64**
Reading Jack Womack *by Richard Calder*

NINE PRESCRIPTIONS FOR MY FUNERAL **69**
by Michael Bishop

THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE *by Lucy Sussex* **72**

EXPLORERS *by Gwyneth Jones* **81**

EFFECTIVE ARCANUM *by Don Webb* **89**

EYETRACKS: Reviews & Opinions **94**

THE JOEY ZONE **128**

Cover: *"The Book of Hours"* by **Rick Berry**

eye DITORIAL

Ten years ago . . .

. . . the EYE was born amidst the splintered shards of a literary movement that failed to answer Bruce Sterling's question: What does it mean to be a barbarian storming the gates when those gates are thrown open and the city's inhabitants prostrate themselves at your feet? What's a proper rebel to do?

All of the Mirrorshaders have struggled with this question. The most successful is Sterling himself, who methodically proceeded to practice his own rhetoric and built a career devoted to extrapolation down into the very fabric of society. If, as the classic example goes, you are given the car, it may not be possible to infer drive-in movies. However, said Bruce, you have an obligation to *try.*

One of the casualties of this uneasy transition from outsider movement to mainstream was Bruce's seditious broadsheet, *Cheap Truth.* It seemed pointless to continue with it, but it seemed a shame to simply let it die. Simultaneously I was galvanized by the artistic vision of Dan Steffan, who set the *exact* tone and look of what the EYE ought to be. Though Dan resigned from the magazine early on, had his visual style not been present, neither would have the magazine. To this day, I feel the magazine remains a logical extension of Steffan's inspiration.

Bruce looked at this and saw our efforts as the appropriate ideological offspring of *Cheap Truth.* He killed his magazine with the birth of mine and began his unbroken series of CATSCAN essays.

CATSCAN set the mold for the magazine's content. Bruce began sifting through the entirety of history, science and culture, making odd linkages, and illuminating peculiar trends. This, I thought, is The Way.

For years people have asked for my "writer's guidelines". I've generally responded by asking them to read the magazine, then go and do likewise. Best I could come up with. For that is my CATSCAN-inspired secret: this magazine is open to essays on *any* topic whatsoever. All you have to do is write it well, and get me interested. As most of the people I know and deal with are members of the sf community, enough of the submitted material concerns sfish subjects to warrant the use of "SF" in the magazine's name.

Let's talk about *Star Trek.* At least half of you just tossed the magazine aside and headed out for a beer when I said that. *Trek,* (and its ideological cousin, the equally vast *Star Wars* media franchise) has been vilified and railed against by serious sf readers for twenty years. Glumly, we've watched as our protests meant nothing and the ST/W "books" proliferated like kudzu on the shrinking sf racks, crowding out the real thing.

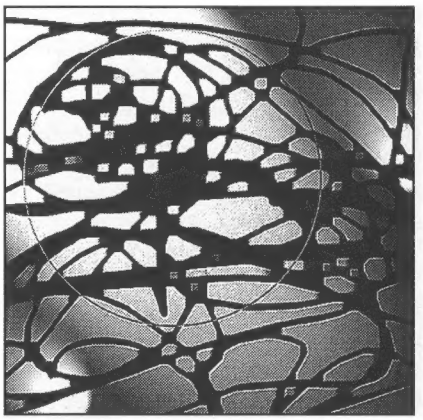
There's a fundamental perception problem here. ST/W is "comfort fiction". It's the opposite of sf. It presents well-known characters, settings and situations with no surprises to disturb the reader's somnolent slog through the chapters. Nothing inherently wrong with that, I read series mysteries to achieve the same effect.

But by utilizing the surface vocabulary of "classic" sf—starships, time travel, aliens, et al.—this new form of comfort fiction has been confused with sf, crowding it out of the racks (as if cookbooks had begun to storm the rack space of the travel guide sections) and creating commercial unrest and dashed expectations (comfort fiction will always be far more popular than challenging fiction that requires effort).

True sf opens a door to an unknown world—whether literal or an author's peculiar interior landscape—leaving the reader fumbling for clues, searching for landmarks, slowly learning the new parameters.

I like to think that every essay in this tenth anniversary issue is a glimpse into an unknown (to me, anyway) world. I can't promise you that future issues will measure up, but then I never could. The EYE has lurched from issue to issue, with increasingly less frequency (as my own personal life acquires complexity), but somehow, I keep getting these essays in the mail, enough of them to force publication of yet another issue. I already have an essay on hand for next time, a look at one of the oddest societies on the planet, one that existed for a brief moment between two oppressive regimes. You just *have* to read this. So it means I'll have to cobble up another issue pretty soon. Let's see what *else* shows up in the mail. ◘

STEPHEN P. BROWN



RAPID eye MOVEMENT

LETTERS OF COMMENT

Dan Clore
St. Helens, OR

DARRELL SCHWEITZER'S COMMENTS IN SF EYE #14 deserve comment, perhaps from a viewpoint slightly more sophisticated than Chris DeVito's.

Schweitzer claims that avant-garde art is "all the same". (He might only mean his stricture to apply to *some* of it, but then it would lose all force: "some—but not all—of it's all the same"?) Let's make an empirical test. Take four avant-garde writers, close contemporaries, and compare their work: Mallarmé, Rimbaud, Isidore Ducasse, and Lautréamont. Only one thing would make them seem "all the same": the reader's failure to understand them. To understanding readers, they belong among the most individualistic of writers; no one would mistake one for another, even though I cheated and listed one under both true name and pseudonym. What Schweitzer has missed in his account is that the reader, as well as the writer, has a job to do. Literary competence can take hard work to acquire, and varies pari passu as genres (even individual texts) vary from each other. When judged by inappropriate standards, literary works almost always fail. You can't always blame the author for his failure to communicate. "Accessibility" will always depend on the reader's literary competence. Reading that merely construes an opaque wall between the reader and text must be considered faulty technique. When the reader learns better, he will stop doing that. Then he will have a chance of discovering a code that works to interpret the text. Not before. Schweitzer will always be free to read one kind of text as another, and complain that it doesn't work (and it's the writer's fault, too), or even that it makes no sense, but he should hardly expect to be taken seriously as long as he does so.

Apuleius, by the way, employed a style filled with rare words, long sentences with complex syntactic structures, and involved, bizarre rhetorical figures. Since he also wrote nonfiction in a plain, straightforward style, we must assume that he did so deliberately. One can only imagine what reception this notoriously "difficult" writer would meet from Schweitzer if translators had not reworked his text into "transparent" prose. Aside from that, I wonder how much of the abstruse mystical allegory—hidden in plain sight as bawdy humor—he picks up on. Another version of the same story, Lucian's "Lucius, the Ass", in a plain style without the difficult symbolism, has not attained the success of Apuleius's version. —Moral?

The issue of "progress in the arts" has a greater complexity than Schweitzer allows. His formulation fails to take into account that the system (hierarchy) of values in art constantly shifts, requiring new devices to fulfill new values, and necessitating the dropping of worn-out devices. If we want to classify "characteristics that accompany success" and "characteristics that accompany failure", than we must make sure to specify success or failure *at what*—we must not judge an artwork by standards foreign to the intention of the text. Should we criticize contemporary Arthurian novels for not including that "characteristic accompanying success"—alliterative verse—utilized in perhaps the greatest Arthurian work yet written: *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight?*

In fact, Schweitzer's failure to comprehend avant-garde texts (which makes him see them as "all the same") seems particularly egregious when you consider that, in reality, he's right that most of their "experimental" elements are in fact "traditional". Many of the devices of "avant-garde" work actually appear universally, or nearly so: in *satire*—we're just unaccustomed to seeing them in "serious" fiction. A study has appeared describing Ambrose Bierce as an "experimental" writer; in fact, it describes him using "satiric" techniques in "serious" fiction. Schweitzer will probably never know the amusement of seeing someone claim that he cannot comprehend a work (and guess who's to blame?) because of an element any child follows easily in Lewis Carroll, Maurice Sendak, or Dr Seuss—and for that matter, in Bugs Bunny cartoons or on *The Simpsons*. We might do well to remember that Alfred Jarry's Ubu (posthumous founder of the avant-garde Theater of the Absurd) originated as a schoolboys' satire against their physics teacher, intended for mari-

onettes—Ubu made the transition from children's farce to avant-garde almost unchanged. But then, Ubu himself pointed out that what makes little people laugh risks making big people afraid. (A harmless scatological joke had caused a riot when presented as "serious" theater.)

It's particularly egregious because —besides satire—one form of literature often includes precisely such elements: the fantastic. Not, however, the mass-market kitsch of the present day, but literary fantasy (especially "horror") from the Romantic period on. We might remember that critical theory on that key avant-garde element *ambiguity* (wherein a text has two or more possible meanings, but leaves determination of the "correct" one undecidable) derives from Todorov's *Le Fantastique.* Indeed, many—perhaps most—writers of satire and avant-garde fiction intertwine that element with the fantastic.

"Non-linear" does not mean merely linear-but-out-of-order as Schweitzer seems to think. Refer instead to Lautréamont or William Burroughs, where no "chronological sequence" can possibly be imposed on the narrative materials. Indeed, try Chuang Tzu (fourth century BCE) for a full-blown non-linear classic. Again, it can mean work which, while following a chronological sequence, relies on a different sort of logic than causality for the continuity of its events. Let's make our example here the Winnebago Trickster cycle (refer to Radin's *The Trickster)*—though we could pick about any picaresque work.

To return to our theme, one of the principle properties of literary evolution is that devices get redeployed with new uses, new functions, creating new structures, rather than always simply dropping out of existence. As late as 1800 Jean-Paul (Richter) could wonder why the döppelganger (a word which he coined) appeared only in comedic works and not horror; soon enough, it dropped from comedy and became a standard of nineteenth-century horror fiction; by this century, it again appears in comedy (but mostly not in horror), as in such popular kitsch as *The Flintstones, Gilligan's Island,* and *The Brady Bunch.* Again, in the Classical period, the grotesque appeared primarily as a comedic device, in the Romantic, as a tragic device, now, as a horrific device—though often in dark humor. Such twistings and turnings, not "progress", define the evolution of the arts. And only when taking into account such diverse functions can one evaluate the success of the device in its various contexts.

Snobbery shows its most ugly face when affected by philistines who take pride in being a common clod who measures success in art by success in the marketplace, and disdains anything written above the level of the herd. I suppose Schweitzer deserves praise for standing up and saying that the Emperor has no clothes (that does take courage), but before a blind man says that they don't exist because he can't see them he should at least grope the guy to find out.

David Griffin
Esopus, NY

I MUST ADMIT I raised the odd eyebrow at Michael Hemmingson's "Techno-Erotic Pagans (& etc.)" piece. My distaste for the internet as a phenomenon is exceeded only by my disdain for Bill Gates as a person, and I certainly would second any argument which stated that spending some 8 to 12 hours every day "inside the electronic frontier" is conducive to incipient mental illness. But in Mr Hemmingson's case, such activity seems perhaps more a symptom than a cause of any parallel disorder. Various incidents related during the course of his account—outstanding warrants, destructive relationships, abusive (chemically and otherwise) companions, "snotty" personality, friendship with Larry McCaffery—would tend to suggest that his life was already out of control. Even the most devoted technophobe must ask for a workable (if necessarily subjective) definition of mental well-being before condemning the internet as destructive to this state.

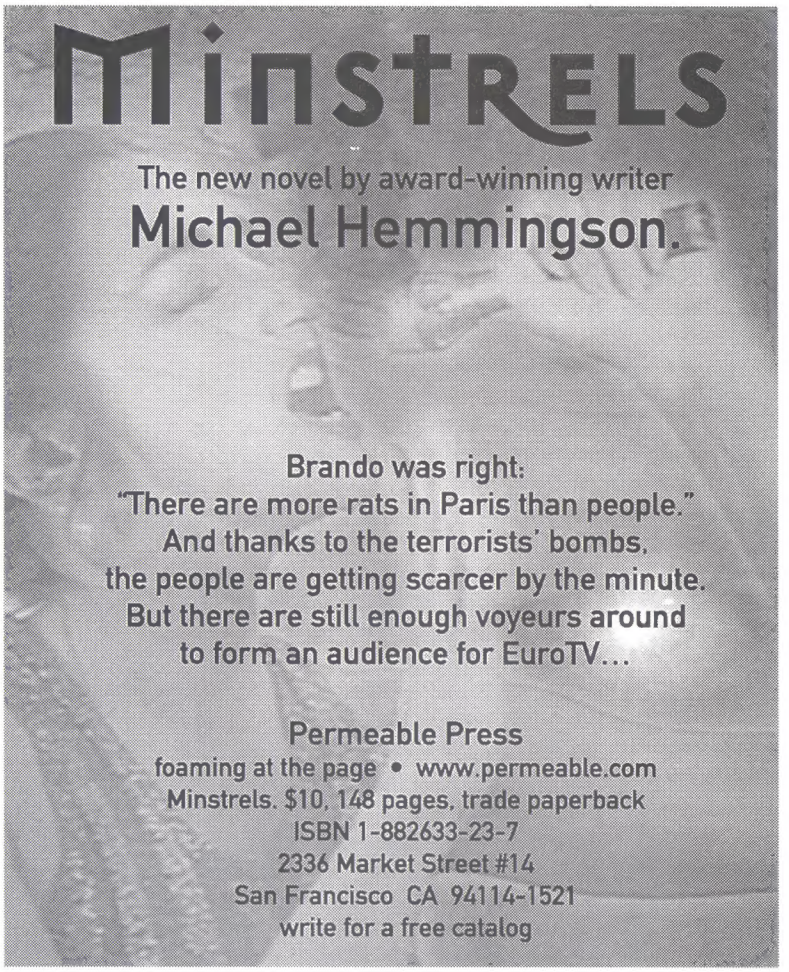
Charles Platt's assertion that the auction of Soviet Space memorabilia was anything other than a squalid display of parvenu infantilism on the part of bidders rankles somewhat. Mr. Platt reflects that he is "glad to see space artifacts removed from protective government control and offered freely to the general public." The last time I stopped by Sotheby's, the viewing reception cost $50.00 and the catalog an additional $150.00. Hardly freely offered. I was not aware that the "general public" could afford to pay $7,000.00 for freeze-dried ice cream. After all, Platt couldn't.

Call me reactionary (or a Communist), but I still believe that there s a difference between, say, a Picasso (painted as one work for one person) and the remnants of an interactive, multi-purpose social program (a socialist social program, no less). The purchase of the first seems to me a perfectly legitimate expression of individual taste. The purchase of some ruined part of the second seems to indicate nothing more than the instincts of the scavenger at work. My sympathies lie with the mid-Western space museum curator: the Soviet space elements, like other systematic designs (political documents, religious icons, architectural fragments) must be interpreted collectively, and, where possible, publicly, if they are to retain more than a rather morbid curiosity value.

The article by Sherry Coldsmith was delightful. How novel to hear someone defend popular culture as popular culture, rather than as a revolutionary meta-dada-techno-meco-psycho-whatzit art form. Coldsmith sees pop culture for what it is, and neither degrades or falsely ennobles it. Her use of the word "pleasure" to describe mass entertainment suggests—daringly—that the term "guilty" need not always precede it. It's nice to know that someone can thoroughly enjoy something non-upscale (be it *Star Wars* or a Milky Way bar) without either wrapping it in plain brown paper or hoisting it onto some idiotic and ultimately shaky pedestal.

Mr. Schweitzer's response to Mr. DeVito was well within its bounds as

far as its general arguments went. I, too, have tired of postmodernist/deconstructivist yahoos and their heaps of broken images. Yet his assurance that "prose which merely puts an opaque wall between the writer and the reader must be counted faulty technique" seems based sole on the supposition that there can be no serious work of fiction (or writing) which is not an attempt to communicate. Opacity is a subject too: occasionally writers can convey a sense of something without telling us what it is—or even knowing what it is themselves. And perhaps readers won't take it seriously. But so what? The writers who produce "inaccessible" books and the readers who ignore them are both making simple aesthetic choices—not, necessarily, the thing by which to determine the actual value of individual works.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Richard Singer
New York, NY

THE FIRST THING I want to do, after skimming over your new issue, is to counter what I see as an unfair condemnation by Richard Calder of G.A. Matiasz's *End Time: Notes on the Apocalypse*. It seems to me that Mr. Calder completely missed the point—and therefore the true benefits of this book. *End Time* . . . is not so great in terms of character and plot, but it is wonderful as a bit of political extrapolation, and also a deliverer of hope. What Matiasz did was to extrapolate a series of 21st-Century revolts based on our most radical movements of the 20th Century (especially the struggles at the beginning of the Spanish Revolution, about which I've done a bit of reading myself), and to give us a little hope that the apathy, cynicism and disconnectedness that currently plague our U.S./Western society can be defeated in the not-to-distant future, when we enter a new revolutionary phase.

Calder's annoyance at the "lengthy, turgid" digressions in this book (including the one he quoted) simply puzzles me, as those digressions contain *End Time . . .'s* greatest rewards. Matiasz apparently knows something about all the factional differences plaguing the Western left, the things that keep leftists apart and the things that can bring them (or in my case, at least, *us)* together. His digressions contain some rather brilliant speculation regarding how the collapse of authoritarian communism, the subsequent massive disintegration of the Third World and the concurrent/related global consolidation of capital might lead to a new insurrectionary spirit (especially in the western hemisphere) charged by an anarchist ultra-left. Matiasz gives us various vivid manifestations of this new spirit, from a massive student/general strike in Berkeley to an uprising in Oakland to a full-scale revolutionary war in southern Mexico. At the same time, he does something that I don't think I have seen in any of the supposedly rebellious cyberpunk that I have read for the past fifteen years: he sweeps us up into the spirit of revolution, helping us to feel the hope and excitement (as well as some of the fear) that we might experience during a genuine revolt against the current wretched order.

Speaking of the cyberpunks of the last fifteen years, I suppose it's because of all those works that I am so refreshed by a book such as *End Time* . . . despite its admittedly shallow characterization, its overemphasis on adolescent angst and its insipid sex. Certainly, Matiasz deserves some stern criticism for these symptoms of sloppiness, but not as much criticism as we should give to the endless parade of cop-out cyberpunks whose supposedly rebellious novels and stories are so often centered on the contest between rugged entrepreneur and ever-invisible, vague and invincible state/corporate cabal/institution/entity. While this cyberpunk model may seem appropriate as a downbeat reflection of certain present situations, it fails to give us any hope for change in the future—the kind of hope that science fiction ideally should bring us, at least once in a

while. Moreover, the heroes of the typical cyberpunk work are hardly revolutionaries since their techno-entrepreneurial spirit more often than not (i.e., a bit more often in the work of Sterling and imitators than in that of Gibson and imitators) fits the market-stimulating ideal prized by today's capitalists. And what kind of revolutions do they supposedly start or advocate? Little more than small cultural rebellions of the type that have already been easily co-opted and resold by the global market and its ruling elite.

In the time since SF EYE's previous issue, I have undergone a few changes, myself, in terms of the kinds of resistance I could advocate or take seriously versus the kind for which I have ever-decreasing patience. I suppose the elections of '94 and the subsequent accelerated attack on the great New Deal compromise (which seemed to go hand-in-hand with an accelerated destruction of various unwritten contracts between employers and employees) were the shocks that woke me, while a good amount of historical and political research—in books and online—has helped me to formulate some more concrete ideas regarding what needs to be done. I believe that Tim Barton's excellent letter in your latest issue does quite well at summing up some of the problems in SF EYE and the supposedly cutting-edge field that it represents. While I certainly do agree with certain anarchist/libertarian attitudes regarding state rule and hierarchy, I could not disagree more with the extropianism/"anarcho"-capitalism which some of SF EYE's contributors advocate. If there is any kind of anarchism we should be looking to for an example, it is not "anarcho"-capitalism but anarcho-syndicalism, with the latter movement's recognition of the need for collective action in pursuit of a truly egalitarian goal, in direct opposition to those who would merely extend the inequality and cruelty of the present system.

Stephen Brown answers Tim Barton's letter merely by stating that he (Stephen) does not "worship at any altar." Unfortunately, this world is reaching such a level of crisis for the vast majority of its occupants (as opposed to the very small minority who have enough disposable income to throw it away on novel techno-toys), that we're going to have to choose which altar we want to worship at, whether it's going to be the altar of ideas that might redeem us or the altar of those same demons who plague us now. It is for this reason that I am feeling evermore resistant toward the idea of supporting forums which would lend credibility to extropians and "anarcho"-capitalists. This is probably one of the main reasons that I have already dropped out of most circles that revolve around sf's supposed cutting edge. I only wish that SF EYE—which used to rank among my favorite publications—did not also give so much space to these spoiled pseudo-libertarian cyberbrats.

. . . and I'm sure the "spoiled pseudo-libertarian cyberbrats" are upset I gave you so much space (and I'd give you even more if you wrote me an essay that stated your case interestingly and, perhaps, tied your case to some work of literature). As ever, I strive to present as many diverse viewpoints as possible. In my opinion, there is only one immutable Law that should never be violated: Diversity. —spb

Don Hampton
Lewiston, ID

SF EYE #14 was especially timely in that I had just finished reading Bruce Sterling's *Heavy Weather* when I read John Clute's excellent review of the book. As a librarian, I read a lot of reviews of books of which I will never personally open the covers after the library buys them. A review that makes you think about the book and go back and find new meaning in it after you have read it once is a pleasure I feared I had lost.

There are a couple of areas in the plot which Mr. Clute dismisses as either meaningless or "feelgood" which seem to me to add up to a comment on the massive inertia of human culture. The novel begins with Alex "cocooned" in a medical clinic, where his sister comes to rescue him from security and take him into the wilderness in search of knowledge. The novel ends with Alex visiting his sister in her own suburban cocoon and (more gently than she did for him) inviting her to relax her secure walls and at least remember the thrill of the pursuit. This gives the story a nice circularity that is more like Bilbo Baggins' return to the Shire than Sam's: the circle ends, but a larger circle remains open.

But the most important aspect is the subplot, which "really doesn't bear much examination". Throughout the novel the condition of the world has been blamed on the older generation. By too much irrigation, too much overgrazing, too much carbon dioxide, just too many people, *they* have caused the condition of the world. The villain is a member of a group which intends to manipulate events to bring an "end to history"—that is, to wipe out human civilization, if not humanity itself, as punishment for leaving them the world as they see it.

By killing the villain and returning to his father, Alex asserts the value of history. He has passed through the F-6, and he still has something to learn from his father. It's not as dramatic or as exciting as bringing down the world in ruins, but every adolescent eventually turns thirtysomething, and the experience of the past is the only thing we can use to predict the future.

John Clute's review and the buzz it generated in my head was worth the price of my year's subscription, all by itself.

As for P.K. Dick, I've always thought that he began by being fascinated by the visions inside his head, then grew afraid that other people were manipulating his visions, then decided that the manipulator was God, so it was all right. The cyberspace/subjective shared reality novels over the past few years have begun to bother me in retrospect. I remember a novel (was it Gunn's *Joy Makers?)*

where everybody ended up lying in vats of goo, plugged in to virtual reality. And in this novel, that was a *bad* thing. When did that change?

Vespaluus
West Midlands, UK

NOT ONLY IS SF BIGGER box-office than at any time since '77, not only do we find multiple evidence of extrasolar planets, not only is this *X-Files* shit more popular than Jesus, but, darn it all to hell, if President William Jefferson Clinton himself doesn't wring out an unassuming red rock with his bare hands and out pops a Martian bacterium?!

Strange days indeed.

So how credible do you find this Martian "life", convinced yet? Me, neither. Still less convinced by the SETI piggyback. Amid all the hullabaloo I heard A.C. Clarke confidently opine that alien intelligence would be in touch "in a century or so". Uhhh, sure. Just put the full Scuba gear on next time you tell it, Arthur, at least as an instant visual clue for the unwary.

As I'm sure I've said before, trying to introduce ourselves, a Type O civilization (using Kardashev's classification, a civilization just beginning to tap a planet's resources), to a technological civilization tens of thousands of years old (a Type II, or even Type III civilization) would serve the same purpose as trying to introduce an amoeba to Mr Oscar Wilde. And then there's the *Independence Day* BEMs; "Hey guys, let's fight these upright monkeys hand-to-hand", is not a sensible call for a Type II civ; "Hey guys, let's ring their sun with ion accelerators, set up an intense circum-solar current/magnetic field and heat its upper atmosphere until it squirts out the poles", is an altogether smarter idea (a technique astrophysical engineer David Criswell calls "Star Lifting", see Schmidt and Zubrin's unexpectedly excellent collection of *Analog* reprints *Islands in the Sky,* chapter 10.)

And thus the gloomy prognoses of Sterling and Platt have been overtaken by circumstance. Bruce is way wrong, anyhow. The near-term prospects for space activity have never been brighter, or more widely democratized. Upwards of forty nations have private/public microsat ambitions, locations as exotic as New Ireland, Papua New Guinea and Alcantara, Brazil are being seriously entertained as spaceport venues, and the cellphone industry is gearing up to pump billions into the development and exploitation of "anti-Clarke" orbits. Nor are the Russians going to be left behind i.e. check out the Boeing/RSC Energiyal NPO Yuzhnoye sea launch project. Norway's Kvaerner have been asked to custom chop a North Sea oilrig, equip it with some humongous turboprops, and then float the whole monstrous affair down to the equator, where it will be anchored somewhere off the coast of either South America or Africa, and from which Ukrainian Zenit-2s will be employed to put up 12 tons of satellite into LEO at a fraction of the cost of any land based alternative. An exemplary cyberpunk initiative, I'd say.

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Ted Chiang
Kirkland, WA

I WAS GLAD TO SEE Issue #14 finally, and I particularly enjoyed reading "This Sucks", Sherry Coldsmith's review of Chris DeVito's *Fuck SF* fanzine.

To me, the biggest surprise in Coldsmith's review came when she claimed that the notion that writers might compromise their artistic vision to achieve commercial success is an "old, hoary myth", and that "no one save a few of the creakiest die-hards in the dustiest recesses of English departments actually believes in this myth anymore". I have to admit, I still believe it, and I've never worked for an English department. While artistic integrity and commercial success are not *by definition* in direct opposition, they often place conflicting demands on a writer, and I think many writers have struggled, or are struggling, with finding a comfortable balance between the two. It may not be fashionable in academic circles to acknowledge this tension (perhaps because of postmodernism's breakdown of the distinction between "high" and "low" art) but the tension is real.

Another interesting thing about "This Sucks" was the fact that several of Coldsmith's observations about *Fuck SF* apply equally to her review

itself. For example, she comments that "'Genital writing,' DeVito's particular innovation in the field of bugsplat critical terminology, tells me nothing." I would say that "bratfan", which Coldsmith uses throughout her review, is no more (or less) illuminating than "genital writing". Ditto for "bugsplat critical terminology", or "Boy Tech", a term Coldsmith has used in previous writings. Maybe all of these terms have well-defined meanings, maybe they're all glib catch phrases; I can't say, but I don't see a qualitative distinction between DeVito's and Coldsmith's.

As another example, consider what Coldsmith says about popular appeal. *Fuck SF* dismissed fiction/media with mass-audience appeal, such as *Star Trek.* Coldsmith says that this is unwarranted because media theorists find a great deal to analyze in popular media, not the least of which is the question of why it's so popular. But Coldsmith herself criticizes *Fuck SF,* and in conversation has also criticized DeVito's infamous letter in SF EYE #10. In doing so, she likewise fails to account for the reaction those publications provoked. People throughout the sf field talked about DeVito's letter and his fanzine; I personally know people who were glad that DeVito was saying what they themselves felt but didn't dare express. Even some who disagreed with him admired his audacity. Coldsmith herself chose to write a critique of *Fuck SF,* rather than of one of the other fanzines that may have lasted longer but attracted less attention, and Stephen Brown wrote "the sf field needs more loud unruly zines like *[Fuck SF]".* Why did *Fuck SF* provoke reactions like these? Perhaps Coldsmith ought to write an essay addressing that question.

Paul T. Riddell
Portland, OR

I HAVE TO ADMIT, I was pleasantly surprised by Sherry Coldsmith's analysis of my work in the late, lamented *Fuck Science Fiction;* since it was intended from the start to make people like Kristine Kathryn Rusch shit blood, I was starting to despair that it would anger anyone. I'm also kinda flattered that she dedicated so much space: to quote Oscar Wilde (by way of Garth Ennis), the only thing worse than being talked about is serving two years for buggery. However, I wish she'd get her facts straight first; I've never had the opportunity to use the old dodge "I was taken out of context" before, so I'm a little excited.

Firstly, she takes me to task quite a bit about my using *Star Trek* and *Star Wars* as examples of how sf has degenerated, quoting authors such as Henry Jenkins III on the "real" sf fan. I know perfectly well that the vast majority of sf fans are relatively rational folks; I specifically went after the crazed ones. Ever since I expressed the notion that George Lucas isn't the cinematic genius half of the fanboy community makes him out to be (Lucas may have had a better FX team, but Ed Wood, Jr. was a much better writer and director), I've had to deal with hordes of nits for whom this is blasphemy. One of the joys of leaving Dallas for Oregon was to get away from one fan, known to the local community as either "The Mouthbreather" or "The Creature From the Black Latrine"; his idea of debate was to come up to me and say "Two words: *Star Wars.*" Of course, he thought that William Shatner's "Get a life" speech referred to other people, but . . .

I don't have any complaint with the folks who enjoy trash for trash's sake. My grandmother reads Sidney Sheldon novels for relaxation, my wife still gets a kick out of Coppola's *One From the Heart,* and our illustrious editor admits that he derives guilty pleasure from *Sliders.* Myself, I get strange looks when people find I get unnatural hankerings for *Married With Children* reruns and back issues of *Guy Gardner* comics. However, the four of us also expand our horizons, which is why I wrote that individual piece in the first place. I've had to deal with far too many people who figured that it didn't exist if it wasn't a movie, TV show, or comic: as I related, I know individuals who consider themselves knowledgeable about sf who base their opinions on their slavish devotion to *Star Trek.* They know of David Wolverton and Ann Crispin, but they've never heard of Robert Heinlein or William Gibson, and they know Harlan Ellison only from his notorious *Star Trek* episode, just as they know John Shirley only from *The Crow.*

I'm willing to overlook that as a case of *thesis strainus,* but I have to take umbrage with being deliberately misquoted. I can't spot a literary whore on sight; I need to see him/her sucking up to an editor first. My sentence said "You don't want to deal with the mainstream magazines; you want to keep your tongue unsoiled and your asshole unpenetrated." I could back this up with stories if I felt that I wouldn't get hit with lawsuits; the only one that really sticks out concerned a trio of writers who followed around one editor at a convention, telling him how great they thought he was, and then calling him names I wouldn't use to describe him (and I'm no fan of his) behind his back. Now *that's* a whore in my book: letting an editor fuck you is one thing if it's love or even for pleasure, but when it's only for money? Besides, I merely suggested that getting the *Deliverance* treatment might not be a good thing; I never told writers to stay in that condition. To quote Joe Bob Briggs, "I believe that people have the right to do any disgusting thing they want, so long as they don't expect us to jump in", thus explaining why I don't get drunk, go to rattlesnake roundups, or judge for "Writers of the Future".

I'm not really worried about Coldsmith's opinion; I agree with the basics of her thesis, but I think she could have come up with better examples of whining bratfandom. I let loose both barrels because I have no delusions about my work being printed in *F&SF* or *Asimov's* in my unnatural lifetime; at least Chris DeVito and I cared enough about the state of science fiction to bitch about it rather than ignoring and neglecting it. Besides, finding out she doesn't wuv me no more just means I have one less place I have to set for Christmas dinner. ◘

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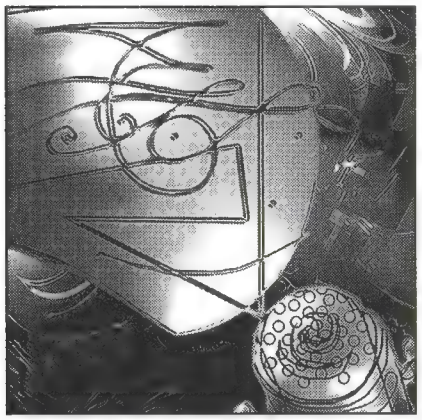


TERMINAL LUNCH

THE LAST LAUGH OF THE MOHICANS

PAUL DI FILIPPO

Mohegan Stunned

. . . and I fell soul-stricken to my knees onto the linoleum of the empty Mohegan Sun's Wolf Den (with its unoccupied vinyl banquette-seating and silent stacks of amps, fitting abode of the tribe's finest entertainers, such as Big Chiefs Frankie and Dino and Sammy). The ceaseless mocking ka-chunk, ka-chunk tolling of the ranks and ranks of slots swelled to fill my ears, causing them to ring as if after days of vision quest. I clasped my hands together in supplication and raised a prayer to the Great Spirit hovering, I hoped, somewhere up above the enormous, babyspot-backlit, canvas stretchers painted to resemble decorated leather hides.

"Is there nowhere nearby, Great Spirit, where the essence of the old ways might still be felt? Has Your Presence departed forever from these ancestral lands? Where, oh where, might your voice still be heard in tranquillity? Tell me, I beg of you!"

And then was my mind lifted up to a celestial perspective, so that I saw the whole immemorial range of the tribes spreading away below me, and my gaze was directed south and to the east, coming to rest upon a certain seasonally-deserted village at the edge of the Endless Shining Waters. Recognizing the place, realizing I knew how to reach it, I lifted myself up, took my patient waiting squaw by the hand, and we departed in our faithful Japanese travois from that accursed cavern of blank-eyed insubstantial shades, leaving them to their senseless torments.

Veterans' Day Reverie

Sometimes it really hits me how much the American culture has changed in one short lifetime (namely, mine). To enumerate the sociological differences between the decade of my birth (the fifties) and the present is to assemble a catalog of change so awesome, that one is hard-pressed to see any continuity. Even more so than the technological gimcracks that bedeck our lives—the computers and VCR's—the attitudes, expectations and pastimes of the average citizen nowadays stand in sharp contrast to those of four decades ago.

Consider:

In our diets, a vast ethnic spread of formerly exotic delectable goodies has replaced the Wonder Bread and Miracle Whip conformity of Eisenhower-era lunchboxes. Three television networks have multiplied into the 500-channel spectrum. The Man in the Grey Flannel Suit is now Mr Dressdown Friday, his beloved Cadillac a Sports Utility Vehicle. Popeye is no longer the only person to sport a tattoo. Unwed motherhood is an acceptable Hollywood PR stunt, not a taboo. Professional sports have lost any antique tinge of amateurism they might have once possessed. Blacks and women, once the hidden majority, have been mainstreamed into the workplace and the armed services and politics. The consumption of hard liquor and cigarettes is declassé, while marijuana is the number one cash crop in some states. Sex exploded out of its poodle skirt and into a leather bustier. Music escaped Tin Pan Alley/Hit Parade domination and fragmented into a hundred styles and cliques and fandoms. Air travel and ocean cruises are no longer the privilege of the wealthy alone, but are proletarian givens. No single national magazine any longer offers an "official" portrait of the country, as *Life* once did. The construct of "middle age" has been pushed continually further onward, from forty to somewhere after sixty. And you can probably name a dozen other departures from the fifties "norm".

Limning this kind of cultural tidal wave, it sometimes seems to me, is as much what sf is about as the shinier, more obvious business of specking out interstellar cruisers and cyberdecks. After all, cultural assumptions determine how any of the technological tools that might develop will actually be used. Some or all of the

trends outlined above, for instance, might very well help to explain why we are not currently living in Orwell's *1984* (seemingly such a foregone conclusion in 1948), but instead inhabiting a world with many more freedoms (and a different class of problems). In a related manner, to forecast second- and third-degree changes in society (most famously: given the auto, to predict drive-in movies) is an aspect of sf frequently neglected.

Which brings me to my actual subject: a cultural transformation unpredicted, to the best of my knowledge, in any past sf, and the further extrapolation of which development is mostly missing from current speculative literature.

I am referring to the legitimization of that ancient coeval of prostitution, gambling. That vice's transfiguration into virtuous "gaming", a forty-billion-dollar-per-year industry, the stripping away of all its seamier aspects and its prettification into a theme-park-style concern fit for family fun.

Any society that tolerates and encourages betting (and generally losing) one's hard-earned money—frequently one's rent or grocery funds—against common-sense odds to the extent that ours currently does is no longer the same one I grew up in. Our modern fascination with lottery winners, exactly congruent with our admiration of heavy-hitters in the stock market (which is nothing if not organized gambling), bespeaks a new attitude toward money, prudence and risk-taking that is bound to play its part in dictating the future state of our nation.

And perhaps the most interesting nexus of gambling and culture are the Native American casinos springing up across the nation. Weaving myth, guilt, stereotypes and recreation into a bizarre tapestry, they offer a fascinating new take on the American Dream.

Two of these duchies of the dice happen to be right in my own backyard: Foxwoods, billing itself as the largest casino in the US, and its new competitor, the nearby Mohegan Sun.

Curious, feeling it was my duty as an sf writer to investigate this phenomenon, I talked my willing but dubious mate, Deborah Newton, into heading down there with me one day—strictly as amateur futurists and dilettante sociologists; no fun expected or allowed.

We picked November 11, Veterans' Day, as a likely time to encounter a lively crowd. And the irony, of course, would be too delicious to resist: on a day meant to commemorate the deaths of millions of soldiers in dozens of wars (including, of course, last century's genocidal Indian campaigns), we would be witnessing the ultimate trivialization of their ultimate sacrifice: Aunt Matilda enjoying the freedom to play Chuck-a-Luck.

So off we went.

A Walk on the Mild Side

I knew right from the outset that Hunter Thompson could not be my role model for this trip. No fear & loathing shtick. I was too old and no longer had a reliable drug dealer, and my car wasn't fast enough to outrun the bulls. But most importantly, as we used to say in the sixties, was the non-conducive "set and setting".

The first and most obvious thing to say about this new breed of casinos is that they are not desert-isolated, sensory-overload sin centers like Las Vegas—are not even, in fact, as "wild" as Atlantic City. (Though from what I understand, even Las Vegas is not Las Vegas anymore, what with the addition of mini-New York skylines and simulated Sphinxes.) The Native American casinos are mild-mannered neighborhood presences, like having a Six Flags in your backyard. (And, coincidentally, rumors are currently flying that the Pequot tribe, owners of Foxwoods, are planning to bring an actual Six Flags to an adjoining parcel of their land, in a move to diversify.)

Everything I had heard about Foxwoods alerted me to the fact that trying to deal with it through a lens of gloriously excessive misbehavior would be like trying to fruitfully acid-trip through a high-school-thespian production of *Cabaret*. Any liftoff into the stratosphere of pharmacological insights would be thwarted by the implacable mundane gravity of the surroundings, the sheer off-key amateur ***niceness*** of the players and hirelings.

Events, sadly, proved this assumption all too true.

We set out around nine A.M., heading south on Route 95, the sun bright, the sky a lush azure harboring the occasional billowy cloudcastle, the chill air scented with a crisp autumnal blend of leaf rot and rain-soaked soil. A mere twenty minutes south of Providence all signs of the apocryphal Boswash Sprawl, beloved icon of sf writers, had disappeared, leaving only pastoral vistas of mild hills and cow-dotted fields. (We are not in that ultra-urban future yet, I realized.) It was all quite lulling, a nice change of scenery for us city-dwellers, but the first sign of the gaming demon was not long in coming.

Within the borders of the town of West Greenwich, ranged along the highway, stood a typical modern office complex, low-slung buildings on a grassy campus. A sign proclaimed it to be the world HQ of G-Tech. G-Tech, any native Rhode Islander knows, is simply the world's largest lottery concern. Supplier of game concepts, software, terminals, scratch-cards, vending machines, etc., they waltz into your state or country with a readymade system for milking the hopeful, hapless populace, thereby bolstering precarious government budgets (and of course themselves) in a sneaky manner that could never be construed as a hated "tax" (except insofar as gambling has long been known as a regressive "tax on ignorance"). G-Tech frequently undergoes convulsions of bad pub-

licity, having been caught bribing one official or another, or elbowing out competitors with more-than-accepted viciousness, but they haven't been taken down yet, and their business is flourishing. Outside their HQ, they fly the flag of every country they operate in: there must have been fifty or seventy-five flags fluttering in the wind that day.

Leaving the wizards of G-Tech behind to brainstorm their latest seduction ("SHAKES-STAKES! To win or not to win, that is the question! If any of your characters match the chosen play, you score big!!! Be a Romeo to your Juliet! Don't be a doubting Hamlet: make up your mind to buy a ticket today!"), we drove a distance similar to what we had already traveled and came upon the exit for Foxwoods.

Now, Connecticut, of course, cannot for the benefit of a private, semi-feudal concern erect a giant sign at the turnoff advising **SUCKERS—THIS WAY TO THE GRINDS,** no matter how much they want to, considering their share of the take. So instead they have erected a giant sign that says **MASHANTUCKET PEQUOT RESERVATION,** complete with the tribal logo (fox on a hill beneath a tree) that also functions as the casino symbol. Thus is conflict of interest avoided and propriety salved.

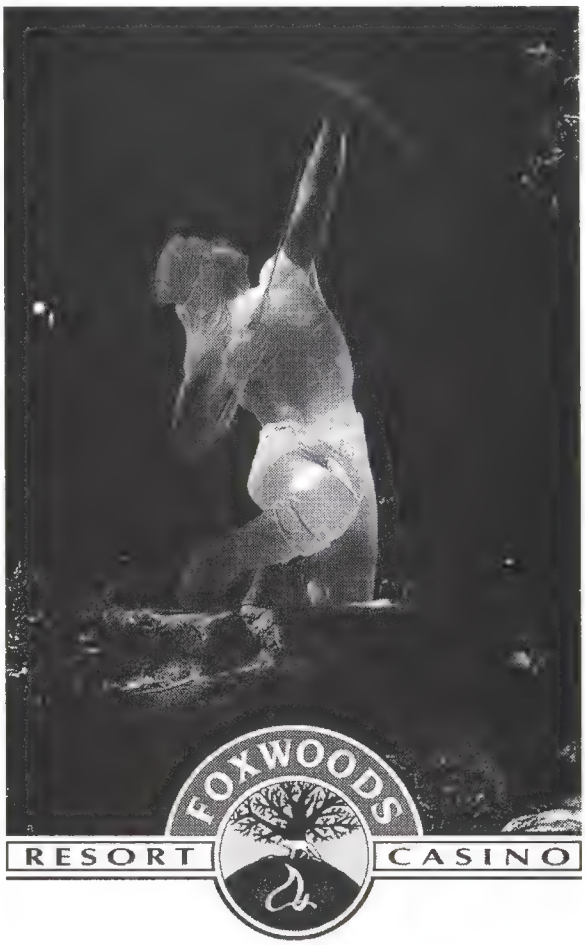
Now we were on Route 2, a charming, winding country blacktop flanked by old stone walls. (Traffic was lighter than I had expected, having heard horror stories of jams on the way to the casino.) There was nothing to tell us we were in the midst of an Indian Reservation, unless it was the greater-than-average frequency of rusting mobile homes interspersed among the modest ranchhouses. A gas station and an honest-to-god **DEWDROP INN (EST. 1918)** were the only businesses.

Then the road carried us around a bend, and we saw it.

Everyone I've ever talked to about visiting Foxwoods uses the exact same metaphor to describe first sighting it: "It was like when Dorothy sees the Emerald City across the field of poppies."There is something to this cliché. The complex, with its alabaster white walls and Martha-Stewart teal green roofs, arises out of such a nothingness that it appears like an invasion mothership planted atop the crushed remains of whatever was unlucky enough to be there first.

But once the initial shock faded, as we got closer, what struck me was how *unexotic,* how undistinguished, how banal the architecture was. Strictly functional, without a trace of Trumpery or Bugsy Siegal garishness or—the most expected—faux Native American style, the multi-story L-shaped hotel and the connected gambling facilities were completely utilitarian, innocuous as a cement plant. The whole complex, save for a few vaguely native diamond motifs and the scattered statue, could have been the most mundane Marriott or Holiday Inn.

We parked in the hotel garage (free, of course; no discouraging potential losers), and went inside.



Give Up and Cry "Uncas!"

The Mohegans and the Pequots had long been allied tribes, ruling a huge swath of Connecticut, from Hartford to the sea, as well as a piece of southern Rhode Island. (Rhode Island's own Narragansetts, who now lust for a legislature-stymied casino of their own, were often at odds with the Mohegan-Pequots, and now seem bested by them once again.) The most vivid leader of the joint tribes was one Uncas, circa 1588–1683, who allied himself with the British in their various colonial conquests. Over the centuries, the joint tribe shrank in land and population to a tiny remnant of its old self, and re-split into its constituent halves. Forgotten in poverty, the Pequots' resurrection began in 1986, with a high-stakes bingo operation. The rest is some kind of laugh-or-cry postmodern success story, a tale that might be called "The Descendants of the Conquistadors Gulled", their stolen wealth flowing in reverse into the coffers of the victims.

Now, if at any point I sound overly cynical or suspicious or disrespectful about this whole business of "gaming", the onus of my disfavor should not be seen to fall solely or even partially on the shoulders of the Native Americans, who have simply taken the only path of salvation available to them with their backs against

the walls of injustice. No, the trouble I have with "gaming" is its whole zero-sum nature. Instead of creating new wealth—like, say, the computer industry, or even that pie-in-the-sky scam known as the World Wide Web—gaming merely regressively redistributes pieces of the economic pie.

The only possible saving grace for gaming is one that I could never quibble with, since my own livelihood depends on the same measure of value. The operative word I'm scrabbling for here is "entertainment". Gaming's proponents offer it as merely one more "entertainment option". After all, they argue, if you go to a movie or a play or concert, you fork over money for nothing but an experience, a memory. The same is more or less true of buying a book or a ski trip or a day at Disney World. In exchange for your cash, you get to have some hopefully memorable "fun".

As I said, I fully endorse this argument. All work and no play, etc., etc. Intangibles are important. If people want to spend their hard-earned dollars on something that gives them a thrill, then I say, "Take out your wallet, friend, and step right up! Three balls for a dollar!"

But there' s only one problem.

I didn't see a single person having fun at either of the two casinos I visited. Not a bloody one. Not a laugh or shout of pure greedy joy could be heard, nor smile seen. Both places were the most boring, sterile, anhedonic, stultifying environments I have ever encountered.

And it was written on the faces of everyone there, player and employee alike.

But don't take my word for it. Follow me.

The elevator from the garage brought us up to the corridors behind the hotel lobby. We negotiated a few turns, moved past a display case holding a sampling of (non-New England) Native American artifacts, then were in the lobby. Here was the first of the statues that constitute the lone ethnic decorative motif in the Foxwoods: the always-popular Young Brave with Eagle. (The Granddaddy of all these pieces at Foxwoods is the multi-lifesize Kneeling Indian Archer, cast in some kind of luminescent glass or fiberglass and aiming his arrow futilely at the ceiling, as if to bring down the whole sham like some New World Goliath.) Obviously intent on not creating a theme-park appearance, the Pequots went overboard in the opposite direction, erecting a facade to conform to the White Man's notion of class.

(One Foxwoods motif meant, I suppose, to echo the wild and free aboriginal lifestyle is lots of running water coursing through sculpted Brickmaster channels, past plastic plants and over synthetic waterfalls, the bed of these simulated streams littered with coins and chips. The only problem is that all the water is heavily chlorinated, and the industrial stink has permeated the entire complex. Wherever you go, it smells like a YMCA shower room.)

Part of Foxwoods was a literal facade, Deborah and I soon found, as we rode escalators up to the casino level. For up here, in addition to the gaming rooms, was a giant food court/entertainment complex cast like a Disney Main Street, USA. The outer wall of the long, two-story concourse was glass, but the inner was a line of falsefronts styled like the shops and homes of a small New England town, circa 1850. (The old fishing town of Mystic is not far away, if any rational pretext is needed.) Lower doors in the stagesets opened onto various actual stores—clothing, souvenirs—but the upper parts of the facades housed animatronic dummies: sea captains, and so on, all chatting their interminable unheard robot patter.

Slightly stupefied (an emotion that was to be the keynote of the day), we ambled along the concourse, through medium-density crowds of lower-middle-class proles, my own chosen people, all looking aimless and frustrated, as if unwilling to admit that their dreams of fun were not going to materialize around the next corner. We saw absurd theme restaurants—the Chinese *Han Garden,* the Italian *Al Dente,* the Manhattan *Deli*—and the Cinetropolis complex: big screens and VR rides, handy drop-off babysitters. We passed the theater where the Queen of the Undead, Carol Channing, would later be appearing. Then we were out in a connecting corridor.

Here on domed tabletops was a diorama of some future construction: a Pequot museum and cultural heritage center. A nice PC/PR move. But I wondered how its attendance figures would compare with those of the casino itself.

We found ourselves approaching a series of glass doors. As we got closer, we saw it was the Bingo Room. Big as two football fields, it held row upon row of seated elderly receding to infinity like a perspective lesson, all industriously marking their cards. In the silence on this side of the thick doors, it was like watching a factory floor. I imagined that inside one would hear the whine of drills and the punch of footpresses. One woman seated near to us was eating an early lunch from a brown paper bag. I flashed on the jewelry shop I had once worked in, with its rows of young girls applying epoxy paint, and was sorry to see them here all grown suddenly old, still in harness.

I should mention now the official uniforms of the staff. Security and pit bosses were in standard business suits. Croupiers and dealers and clerks wore dark pants and white shirts. The shirts had lines of trim along their button-fronts meant to suggest Indian beadwork, but equally resembling some kind of Lithuanian/Albanian/Estonian needlework. The roving cocktail waitresses were the most theatrically costumed: a single feather in a headband, and a short shift meant to look like a squaw's dress, the effect being spoiled only by the fact that fabric used was a chemical shade of maroon and made of slippery Qiana.

We felt strong enough to face the slot machines now, and went in among the hundreds and hundreds of noisy contraptions. The room was overly bright, dazzling, and the machines were grouped according to theme: Indy racing, video poker, etc., just like

so many hokey pinball games.

Women pushing wheeled metal strongboxes with identifying bicycle-style flags-on-whips projecting skyward circulated, so that players need never get up for fresh cash. I approached one.

"What kinds of coins do the slots take?" I asked.

She looked at me as if I were Martian. "Whadda ya mean?"

Maybe she thought I was one of them there invidious slug-mongers, a few of whom had been arrested here last week. I felt suspicious enough already, not playing anything and walking around with pen and notebook out, and was certain Deb and I were being tracked on numerous video cameras, our mugs being compared against a database of digitized criminals.

I tried again. "Can I buy, uh, some half-dollars?"

Now we were on familiar ground. "Sure." She handed me a ten-dollar roll, and Deb and I picked out a random machine and sat down.

"Here you go, baby. Knock yourself out."

"Gee, thanks, big spender."

Our first play paid off five to one. I tried to feel excited, but it was too unreal. But when, in the next three minutes, we lost our meager winnings as well as our entire stake, I had no problem feeling hollow. I thought of Harlan Ellison's "Pretty Maggie Money-eyes", the tale of the soul of a hard-hearted hooker sucked into a slot machine, but felt that the digital circuitry of these armless bandits could never contain anything so vast.

I could see now how these suckers could generate a three million dollar per day profit, as they recently had on a record day. "You could blow through a thousand bucks in no time on these things."

"And these aren't even the high-stakes machines."

One of the Disco Indian Waitresses came by, skinny legs and pinched grimace, hustling booze at eleven A.M., and Deborah eyed her.

"It would help if there were some sex here. But there's none at all, is there?"

"Maybe when Carol Channing arrives . . ."

We got up and headed for the table games. I grabbed a couple of plastic coin cups as mementos of my thrills. Foxwoods would repay me one way or another.

The roulette wheels and craps tables and blackjack games were pretty well packed, lugubrious faces crowding around, and I didn't feel like attracting attention as a mere spectator. I hoped to talk to someone—fellow player or employee—to suss out what brought them here, but everyone seemed encased in an impenetrable film of boredom and weariness, as shabby of spirit as the dirty trodden carpets.

There was indeed a Chuck-a-Luck table, but it was closed.

Then Deborah saw the Money Wheel: a six-foot spinning device of spokes hitting a leather flapper, its divisions bearing images of dollar amounts representing the possible bets.

"I like that. It's old-fashioned."

It was true. A little bit of tawdry carny glory clung to the primitive game.

We joined the bettors and I bought ten dollars worth of dollar chips. But before play could begin, there was a delivery of new chips by the pit boss, a guy whose nametag read KIM. Kim looked as if he had been drawn by Dan Clowes, a pencil-mustached smoothie. While one of the pair of Wheelmen filled out the elaborate paperwork and conducted the ritual counting of the delivery, Deborah struck up a conversation with the other Money Wheel operator. Roy was a white-haired, simple and honest-looking soul. In another day and age, he would have made a believable milkman or machinist.

"Do you like this job, Roy?"

"It's okay. I started coming here a lot to play, then I got hired. It was more fun when I was playing. I thought I had a winning system then. But when I started working here, I saw there was none."

Well, there was the illusionist's dilemma in a nutshell, I thought. Actor, writer, musician or porn star, once you get behind the scenery, it all looks undeniably hopeless. Better in some ways to stay in the peanut gallery.

Play began. One bettor, standing, was a dead ringer for that raw-boned rube puppet of yore, Mortimer Snerd. He'd dart in to lay his bet, then jump back, as if the table were liable to bite him. Roy and his partner would make a mystical gesture of their palm-down hands swiped across the board to indicate betting was at a halt. It was the most showy thing I saw at Foxwoods. Then the wheel would chatter through its leisurely revolutions. Kim hung around long enough to chastise us.

"C'mon, c'mon, people, you're betting like you're making a mortgage payment! Let's see a little excitement! You're supposed to be having fun!"

Imagine that: it was all out in the open: the volunteers of the Great National Gaming Fun Horde had to be shamelessly cajoled into faking a cum shot. Shucks, there went my big exposé.

It took a little longer to lose our ten-spot on the Money Wheel than on the slots, thus qualifying it as a better "entertainment" bargain, I guess. We moved on.

"This chlorine smell is giving me a headache."

"Me too."

We found the poker tables, not far from one of the Wampum Club locations. A woman instructor—no Diamond Lil type, but more like an earnest graduate of Winnemuca Teachers' College—was trying to educate some novices in the mysteries of the game. Her pupils looked as uncomfortable as if listening to a workplace lecture on their 401k plans.

I picked up a pamphlet from a lonely dispenser hidden behind a column.

GAMBLING PROBLEM?
THERE IS *HELP!*
Call the
Connecticut Council
on Compulsive
Gambling.

It hardly seemed any of the behavior I was seeing merited the high praise of calling it "compulsive". It was more like absentmindedly scratching your poison-ivy rash even though you know you shouldn't.

We wandered into a darkened amphitheater where high-up big screen TV's relayed horse races from around the nation. Curving consoles with seats—kind of like the ones on the bridge of the Enterprise—housed individual smaller screens showing the same thing, and these were the ones being used, no community of watchers existing as at a real racetrack.

Now we came upon the Festival Buffet, a wilderness of steam tables full of what resembled Textured Vegetable Protein. It reminded me of a high-school cafeteria.

"Do you want something to eat?"

"I couldn't. Really. Have we seen everything? Can't we leave? Please?"

"Sure."

Failing to retrace our exact steps somehow, we ended up on a basement level. Searching for the stairs back up, we came upon the official presence of the Pequot Nation in the casino, the prototype of the heritage center to come.

In a single large room were several well-done, informative, museum-quality exhibits of pre-modern Pequot history and life. A full-scale bark wigwam filled the center of the room. At a desk sat the exhibit caretaker. She was a plump middle-aged woman with unmistakable Native American features and greying hair. I realized then that hers was the only native face I had yet seen here. Not a waitress or a dealer or a janitor had been patently a Pequot. It dawned on me why.

The Pequot tribal members were all hereditarily rich now, by simple right of birth. None of them *had* to work. They were absentee landlords, grandees, the new plantation owners, sitting on their verandas, mulling over several centuries of injustice and the delayed payback, wondering if the scales balanced yet, or ever would.

"Please," she said, "take a copy of our newspaper. *The Pequot Times.*"

We accepted a copy of the slick color publication, and I opened it briefly on the way out.

Inside was a cartoon of the first Thanksgiving. One Indian, looking at the Pilgrims, was saying, "Maybe we could train them to be dealers?"

And by the exit was a *donation* box.

I had predicted that the irony to be savored today would be of an excellent vintage, and indeed it was. But oh, so, so bitter.

Longhouse Longeurs

Peter Stearns is the author of *American Cool: Constructing a Twentieth Century Emotional Style.* In this book he labels an inculcated modern fear of deep, primal feelings as "anti-intensity emotionology". It's the notion that civilization and our personal lives should always run at a mediocre level of smoothed-out feelings. Ingrained in schools and the workplace, the habit of reining ourselves in with implanted mental censors is now so entrenched that we can't turn it off even when we should. (Like any good journalist, of course, I have not actually *read* Stearns' book, having come across a second-hand description of it in an equally intriguing article on the same topic by critic James Atlas in *The New Yorker* for November 18, 1996.)

This was obviously what had been happening at Foxwoods. Their everyday lives channelized, their acceptable range of emotions hourly squelched, the patrons of the casino were simply wound up too tight to get funky. Losing or winning were outcomes of equal weight, both beside the point. The point was spending one's minimal free time in the properly structured, safe "pleasure" environment: an environment subtly designed as another cultural impediment to any possibly antisocial release.

How could I have expected loud, brash, cigar-smoking, babe-on-each-arm, champagne-swilling, fuck-it-all behavior from a collection of clock-punching, TV-watching drones? Wasn't this simply another case of democracy in action diluting and washing out the colorful elitist recreations of olden times? Maybe gambling should have stayed restricted to Tolstoyan nobility. Monte Carlo isn't for everyone. Maybe the whole exercise should be made illegal again, to restore its bloody gangster exuberance. (Maybe I should just shut up.)

But I couldn't see why we actually *needed* gaming at all in our present situation. Our *fin-de-siècle* existence is a

minute-by-minute gamble for the highest stakes just as it stands, if we only let ourselves realize it. Simply getting in the car and driving here had put us at real risk for becoming a traffic mortality statistic. Eating a plate of fried chicken was a spin of the Heart Attack Wheel. The new drug your doctor prescribes might come up snake-eyes. Your next 747 experience could end up as a wilder ride than that of the little ball in the Roulette Wheel, skimming the wavetops off the Comoros Islands.

No, the casino experience—even theoretically unfettered—was superfluous, definitely deficient in actual thrills, compared to, say, braving any commuter highway at rush hour.

But, intrepid investigators that Deborah and I were, we nonetheless headed toward our second destination.

The Mohegans have built *their* casino a mere ten miles away from Foxwoods. Talk about counting coup. I can just see the discussions that must have gone on in Mohegan tribal councils: "Our cousins have grown large and complacent and insufferable, like a pampered racoon raised among the hogans. They do not honor the bounty of the Great Croupier properly. Shall we not show them the bareness of our backsides, and give them a loud Bronx raspberry as well?"

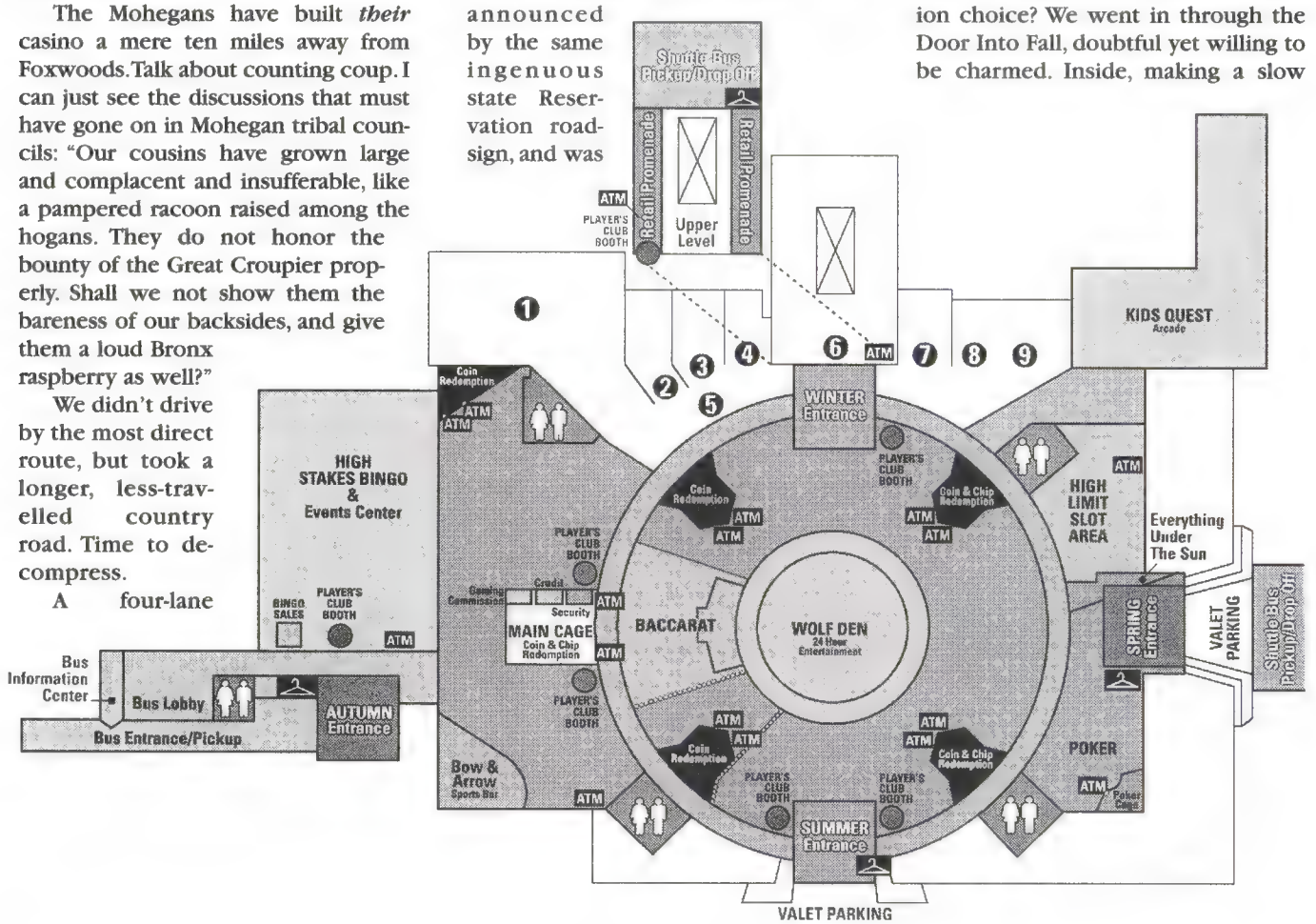
We didn't drive by the most direct route, but took a longer, less-travelled country road. Time to decompress.

A four-lane bridge carried us over the Thames River. Downriver was a fading nexus of militarism: the US Coast Guard Academy, the nuclear sub shipyards of Groton and New London. Connecticut, along with Texas and California, had always been one of the biggest beneficiaries of Pentagon largesse. As the teat was withdrawn, the state economy had gone into spasms. No wonder the casinos had been welcomed so heartily. From *Das Boot* to a blackjack shoe. And yet—was this the best possible post-coldwar economic development? Could displaced unionized twenty-dollar-an-hour workers be happy dealing Texas Hold 'Em for minimum plus tips? Sure, gambling was better than building instruments of mass death. But was the peace dividend nothing more than a free drink coupon?

The Mohegan Sun casino was announced by the same ingenuous state Reservation roadsign, and was only a short distance off the exit.

From the far side of the enormous shuttle-bus-threaded parking lot, the Mohegan casino looked utterly mall-like—save for one feature. At the four main entrances, enormous varnished crossing timbers had been erected to form a teepee-like outdoor passage. This was our first indication that the Mohegans had decided to veer one-hundred-and-eighty degrees from the blandness of Foxwoods. Realizing that their "Indianhood" was a draw, they had managed to capitalize on it without becoming too, too cartoonish.

As their glossy brochure called "Territory Map" shows, the main casino is in the round, its cardinal entrances being named for the seasons. Outside the Autumn entrance, the parking valet, a middle-aged white guy, was wearing a Stetson. More irony, or simply an unconscious fashion choice? We went in through the Door Into Fall, doubtful yet willing to be charmed. Inside, making a slow



circuit of the perimeter, we found a fantasia of some otherworldly longhouse.

The far-off black-painted industrial girders of the ceiling were mostly screened by suspended asymmetrical slices of canvas, canted at interesting angles, and mimicking painted animal hides. Fake trees, proportioned for giants, each displaying the appropriate foliage/snow for their season, stood at intervals throughout. Stone totems leered like the dwarf-cottage carvings in Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*. The lighting was a deep amber, soothing and vaguely firelike. The help was dressed less polyester, in a variety of pseudo-buckskin, leather-laced outfits. (The cocktail waitresses were even a little sexy, in a kind of high-school cheerleader fashion.) The color scheme employed more earthtones. Overall, there was a pleasant element of humor mixed with respect apparent in the design.

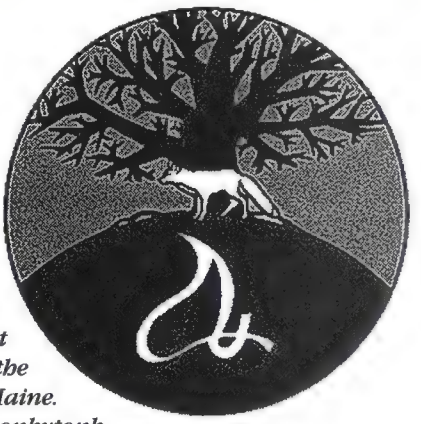
But of course, after the novelty of the atmosphere wore off (about half an hour), one was faced with the ineluctable sad sameness of the activities concealed therein. The patrons here seemed slightly higher class for some reason, and less burnt-out, drawn and infected by the newness of the place (open only a month). But there was still that pervasive anomie, the sensation that any fun was dutiful.

I splurged for another ten dollars of Kennedy halves. (Are casinos the only place in the nation where these coins circulate?) We picked out a slot called "The Mohegan Money Tree" because of its non-generic hook. But fealty to our hosts was ill rewarded, as the bastard machine inhaled our money without a single token payback.

Hungry, dispirited, thirty dollars poorer, sated for a lifetime after a mere five hours or so of "gaming", Deborah and I decided to cut across the center of the longhouse in a beeline for the Autumn exit and our car.

And that was when we found ourselves in the eerily vacant Wolf Den, the omphalos at the heart of the circular casino, and I fell soul-stricken to my knees . . . ◘

By the Sea, By the Sea, By the Beautiful Sea!



Watch Hill, Rhode Island, is only a few miles and a few minutes from the Indian casinos of Connecticut. But it's another world. Here must have come the ancient Pequots and Mohegans over many generations, in their seasonal migrations, camping and harvesting the bounty of the sea.

Nowadays the town is a summer resort community, one of hundreds that dot the Eastern seaboard from New Jersey to Maine. Some are elegant (Newport), some are honkytonk (Hampton Beach), some are just quaint and domestic, site of easy summer living for an amalgam of the upper middle class and the old money families. Watch Hill is one of the latter. The houses are mostly small and old, though well-preserved, with a few big hilltop mansions in various states of prideful upkeep or grand decay. No obvious trophy homes of the eighties junkbonders here. A main street only a few blocks long boasts a couple of restaurants, a couple of souvenir shops, and a used book store, all closed at this time of the year. (Although the book store had a few warped volumes on display outdoors, unattended under a sheltering cupboard, with a sign asking customers to slip their payment beneath the door.) There's a beachside carousel that's one of the oldest in the nation. Its horses are the flying kind, suspended from chains rather than mounted on poles. Now they were gone, hibernating till the sun returned.

Deb and I parked by the beach. Aside from a few hardy fishermen, we were the only souls around. This was one of our favorite spots in our state, although too often whole summers would go by without our being able to pay a visit. This November day, the silence, the bracing winds and the maritime smells were a welcome antidote to the casino smoke and noise. We started walking, first through the streets, then along the sands.

Watch Hill was how the nation used to define relaxing. A pastoral, yet civilized spot where one could "re-create" oneself. Now it was on the margins of our national consciousness, a precinct of Ninevah. I wondered how many of these houses would change hands over the next few years, as a younger generation came to disdain them.

On the beach a truck was parked, its driver sealed up inside the cab, watching the waves. Before our trip, I would have reviled him as a plastic-strap-cap-wearing insensitive jerk. But now I thought different: at least he was here in a natural setting instead of inside a casino.

Behind us, on a sloping lawn gone brown with the cold, stood a crumbling yellow Victorian hotel, Ocean House, closed for the winter. Plainly, it offered no allurements aside from its location: no slots, no tables, no pre-programmed "fun".

"I'd like to stay there."

"Me too."

As we trudged along the beach, I could feel the Great Spirit's approving presence. He had been wise to send us here.

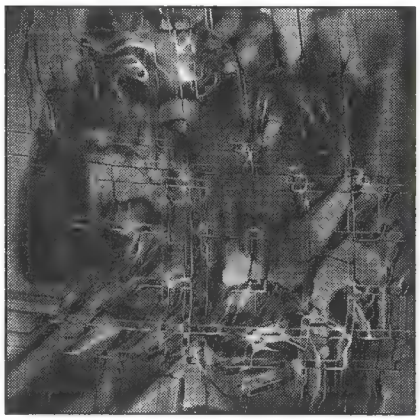
We stopped, leaning into the stiff wind. Fixed on the multitudinous, infinitely varied sand, my eyes filled with an image of something whose significance escaped me at first. But then it all clicked into place. I began to chuckle.

The sands were full of shells. Hundreds of them for the taking. Nothing but shells, as far as the eye could see.

Wampum.

Acres of it.

Yours for the effort of bending down and scooping it up. ◘



CAT SCAN

BIG SCIENCE — THE YEAR IN REVUE

Life is changing at the lab bench. Nineteen ninety-six was not a happy year for American science. The Cold War gravy train has long since left the station. The federal cornucopia is now firmly in the mitts of mean-spirited congressional Republicans.

A few of these Republican new-hires are still eager to pitchfork big bucks into the coffers of military research, but most of them are stingy Babbitts of the ultra-right. They're certainly not friends of the fifty-year-old federally-supported scientific research establishment.

They hate big government. And more to the point, they hate big science. They dislike blue-sky basic research, due to the stark fact that they distrust any social entity that is not market-driven. These strange people even prefer their churches market-driven—televangelist enterprises, where God is short of cash and Jesus welcomes money-lenders.

The new masters of the budget have an especially deep and abiding resentment for: evolutionists, ecologists, biologists, anthropologists, land-use management types of any description, meteorologists, global-warming people, and anyone whose discipline includes the taboo word "social". This comprises a large chunk of the traditional federal research enterprise. These poor guys have surely got to sweat it nowadays, in a fiscal climate where even federal bomb-designers go broke.

The scientific elite still hasn't learned to take creationists and their reactionary fellow-travellers seriously.

Most scientists are really busy, hard-working people, single-mindedly dedicated to the task at hand. Scientists ask surprisingly little from the rest of humanity. Mostly, they just want the bourgeoisie to pony up the grant money and shut up, so that they can research and publish. When scientists try to lobby and defend their political interests upon the public stage, they're so naïve, arrogant, and self-absorbed that they often do themselves more harm than good.

There are, of course, a few especially thorny and self-important scientists, who enjoy headline-grabbing cultural warfare. These show-offs have laudable energies, but they wasted a lot of breath in 1996 attacking postmodernists. Scientists naturally enjoy savaging postmodernists, because postmodernists sorta dress, look and talk like scientists, and yet they're vile aliens—psychoanalyst, cultural-relativist, crypto-Marxist literary critics.

The cool thing about postmodernists as Big Science's appointed class-enemies is that postmodernists can mostly be found on the very same campuses as scientists. Most scientists would have no idea where to hunt up and confront their sincerest and most dangerous enemies—unlike humanist-wimp pomo people, squint-eyed fundie yahoos are so far outside the pale of scientific culture that they're effectively invisible. Scientific culture-warriors charging from the ivory tower have no real clue for defeating a "creationist"—they never even see them, outside of the most rapidly thumb-switched cable channels. The notion of tackling a creationist head-to-head, and perhaps getting septic Baptist froth on the lapel of one's labcoat, is horrifying.

Scientists believe that straight people are too stupid to ever understand scientists or what they do. This is one of the great inspiring and unifying myths of science as a subculture: that scientists are too bright for the rabble to comprehend. They're too *brilliant* to understand, mind you: not just too weird. Or too jargon-riddled. Or too academically irrelevant to be worth bothering with in the first place. Scientists are just too, too bright. When literary and artistic avant-gardes try this kind of intellectual turf-defense, they're often considered laughable, pretentious or decadent; but for scientists this still works like gangbusters.

Whenever scientists are faced with serious ideological and financial difficulties, such as the ones they confront now, they imagine that what is needed is more pop-science education. Perhaps some Saganesque sense-of-wonder consciousness-

BRUCE STERLING

raising. It hasn't yet dawned on American scientists that there are vast legions of voters who understand only too well what scientists do and what scientists stand for, and they specifically hate scientists for that and because of that.

The true enemies of science know that scientists are secular agnostics whose methods of intellectual exploration are devastatingly powerful and profoundly subversive of revelation.

Science has made a lot of enemies, and with the decline of the doctrine of endless economic "progress", it lost more than a few of its fair-weather friends. The truth may well be out there, but Keats was optimistic when he said the truth was beautiful. The truth may indeed have a certain severe Euclidean beauty, but for many people, the sacrifice of cultural certainties seems too high a price to pay for the dubious pleasures of permanent skepticism.

Scientists rate the truth pretty highly, and are sometimes relatively honest with one another—if they can get the word out through channels which the rubes aren't too likely to notice. But scientists have never liked being honest with the straights. It never got Galileo anywhere. It's bad for business. And trouble doesn't make scientists more honest. It makes them less so.

In the rest of this essay, I would like to dissect a recent propaganda document from the American Association for the Advancement of Science. This document is called: "Science Magazine Names 1996's Top Breakthrough (Plus Nine Runners-Up)". It's available on World Wide Web and in *Science* magazine, among other places. I consider this piece of invisible literature to be an excellent example of the scientific establishment's modern mandarin mealy-mouthing.

The end of the year offers a natural opportunity for upbeat summary. The AAAS and *Science* magazine have come to specialize in this sort of thing—publicity documents which are always well-informed on research trends, but increasingly fraudulent politically. Over the years, the warm and fuzzy puff-pieces they create for public consumption have diverged more and more radically from the growing distress on their editorial page. Their PR efforts no longer make much pretense of scientific objectivity. They have become blatant pitches for the taxpayer's money. It's *about* science, but it isn't science. It's agitation.

The agenda here is to convince people to give science money and awe-struck respect—without provoking people to inquire too deeply into the real-world activities of scientists, their budget processes, the ends pursued, and their political, social, and economic implications. "Top Breakthrough of 1996" *does* cite *some* implications, mind you—but only those implications which are rosy, and certain to boost an aura of unquestioned prestige for an intellectual elite.

In this installment of CATSCAN, I've taken the liberty of citing the holiday-season 1996 AAAS press release in full. In the interests of fuller disclosure and the eternal quest for objective truth, I've added a few Scrooge-like comments of my very own. My comments [look like this].

Dateline: Washington, DC (11 December 1996)

"In the 20 December 1996 issue of *Science,* the editors will announce their picks for the top ten research breakthroughs of 1996. Every December *Science* highlights scientific advances from the past 12 months that have made the greatest impact on science and society. This year's report also offers the editors' forecast for what will be the hottest scientific issues in 1997.

"For 1996, the top 'Breakthrough of the Year' is: New Weapons Against HIV. For years scientists have been frustrated in their efforts to combat AIDS. In 1996 new therapeutics, such as protease inhibitors, and basic research advances, such as the finding that natural polypeptide molecules called chemokines can suppress HIV, offered new weapons against the virus, and raised the possibility that HIV infection may one day become a chronic rather than fatal disease."

[This is a brassy and martial bit of news, but I do wonder about the implications. Imagine if this aggressive report on "new weapons" had come from the US military, instead of wannabe-macho civilian scientists. "The enemy was formerly advancing ruthlessly on all fronts and killing everyone it touched, but our shining hope for 1996 is the possibility of chronic, long-term stalemate!" Some "breakthrough", general. . . . Chronic AIDS might now dwell indefinitely in the bodies of the wealthy, while butchering those who can't afford high-tech chemokines.]

"The editors also chose to honor nine runner-up innovations for 1996:

"The Origins of Life: Researchers pushed to new heights our understanding of the origin of life, from the tantalizing possibility of life on Mars to the confirmation that there are three great domains of life, rather than the five kingdoms as classically taught."

[Why are we conflating Martian vaporware with genetic analysis? If the Martian rock evidence turns out to be just instrumental artifacts, then clearly our understanding on that front hasn't budged an inch. The business about "great domains of life" sounds like mystic scientism—it has a distressing Dancing Wu-Li Masters ring to it, without making it clear to anyone what has actually been discovered.]

"Online Publishing: Almost every scholarly publication in the world jumped online this year, furthering the revolution in how scientists gather and disseminate information."

[Online publishing has been a big deal everywhere in 1996, not just in science. Nowadays you could utter much the same brag for car salesmen and pornographers, and those guys aren't asking for tenure. Besides, who's to say that this "revo-

lution" will really benefit scientific research in the long run—especially, long-term archival activities? What about the damage to long-established scientific traditions of peer-review, precedence, and proper citation? The online revolution has also been a revolution in obscuring, misplacing, and forgetting data—often, data that probably shouldn't have disseminated in the first place.]

"Prion Diseases: Previously blamed for the bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) outbreak in British cows, this year prions (short for 'protein infective agent') were suspected of jumping the species barrier and causing a new kind of Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease, a crippling neurodegenerative disease in humans. In the midst of the fear, scientists debated whether proteins themselves can, in fact, transmit diseases, and whether they exist in different strains."

[Now here we have a truly interesting issue. The brains of millions of people may become bloody cheesecloth merely because we ate hamburgers. The Tory government in Britain have done everything semi-legally possible to "protect" the British cattle industry by obscuring this stark scientific possibility. BSE may be a biological Chernobyl in the making, right out there with other vague but possibly lethal developments, such as antibiotic resistance and toxic pseudo-estrogens. Of course, these enviro-scares may all be mere alarmism, including BSE—but if even one of these horrors is factual, it may kill people in the tens or hundreds of millions, including whole trainloads of scientists. But hey, according to *Science*, the study of BSE represents objective science at its best! "In the midst of fear" and an unmentioned, uncited and completely outrageous British governmental cover-up, let's all be very calm, deliberate and rational about this trifling little debate.]

"Lasers: Lasers are the workhorses of modern science, used in everything from surgery to surveying. In 1996, new laser materials and designs lit up the field on several fronts—advances that could make lasers even more versatile and economical."

[Let's face it, fellas: lasers are thirty years old now. Lasers are yawnsville. Next.]

"Complete Genetic Sequence of Yeast: A major milestone for gene sequencing was passed in 1996: the first full sequence of a eukaryote (organisms, such as humans, whose cells have a membrane-bound nucleus). The lucky eukaryote? Baker's yeast, *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*. The achievement will help scientists unravel the basic genetic toolkit for such common eukaryotic functions as cell division."

[That's an impressive accomplishment, gene-hacking yeast. The benefits seem pretty obvious, but I wonder what the lads down at Saddam Hussein's bio-war labs make of this development. Baker's yeast is common and very cheap, and it stores well. People use it in their kitchens. They made bathtub gin with yeast, by the gallon and the tun. It's the tamest micro-organism we have. It's also impossible to police, and impossible to recall once new variants are loose. Has that "genetic toolkit" been posted on the Web yet? Mind if they employ that toolkit in Medellin and Cali? Will the day come soon when the street finds its own uses for hideous bathtub-tailored mutant yeasts?]

"T-Cell Structure: T-cells that attack virus-infected cells are among the immune system's most potent weapons. This year, two groups of researchers coaxed T-cells to give up their last structural secret by obtaining the first three-dimensional image of the T-cell receptors in action—bound to their target molecules. This kind of detailed structural knowledge should pave the way to new therapeutic drug designs."

[Yet more medical weapon-imagery here. Maybe it's just me, but I find this rhetoric disquieting—as if doctors from NIH have decided to angle for Pentagon funding. T-cells, mind you, aren't inventions. They're discoveries. And "therapeutic drug design" doesn't take place in an ivory tower—it's a commercial process. Basically, this breakthrough is about commercializing the body's own immune defenses. It means turning T-cells, the common legacy of humankind, into an over-the-counter remedy for the profit of Ciba-Geigy and Sandoz. "Miracle drug" antibiotics have been exploited—and over-exploited—to the point that pestilent micro-organisms are becoming resistant around the world. But T-cells aren't something we've made up—they're at the core of our natural bodily integrity and health. Once we've commercially exploited our own immune system's most potent weapons, we'll have nothing left to fall back on when the microbes become resistant to that as well.]

"Earth's Inner Core: For a long time scientists thought that Earth's inner core was static, but in 1996, after 30 years of data-gathering, researchers learned it actually spins faster than the rest of the planet. The work changes how we understand our planetary home."

[I truly admire this discovery. It's always bracing and exciting to get such a stark glimpse of the profound depths of humanity's ignorance. Give it another thirty years or so of hard geophysical labor, and we may yet achieve some dim understanding of what transpires under our own feet!]

"Embryonic Positioning: In a developing animal embryo, each cell learns its exact location relative to other cells in order to give rise to the appropriate organ, tissue or nerve. This fundamental 'biological positioning system' was further elucidated in 1996 by researchers who identified new

molecules that carry and detect positional signals. Besides unmasking a process basic to life, these findings could lead to better treatment for cancers that arise when such signals go haywire."

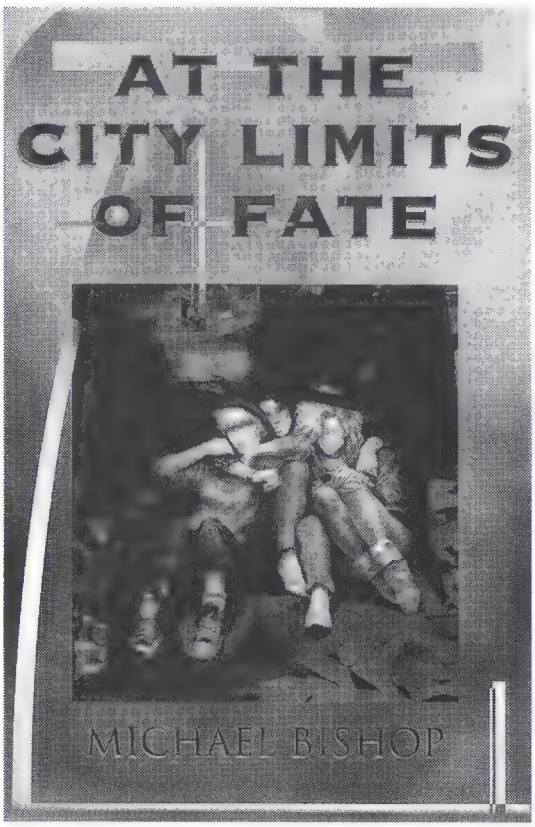
[A cure for cancer—this campaign-banner has been flapped so much that it's utterly threadbare. The killer applications for embryonic positioning obviously have nothing to do with cancer. They've got everything to do with manipulating embryos. Think of the commercial possibilities—baby lab rats big as water buffalos!]

"Apoptosis Signaling: Every cell contains a built-in 'death wish' that is triggered when the good of the organism demands it. This year, researchers made great headway in decoding this genetic self-destruct program, adding not only to basic science but also to our understanding of diseases in which apoptosis goes awry."

["Now that we've mastered the 'death wish,' we can cure more disease for the good of the organism!" That's not merely apoptositic, but downright oxymoronic. There may well be a few lifesaving spinoffs from this discovery—but what about those swell new trace poisons that cause every cell in the enemy's body to murder itself spontaneously?]

"In a sidebar, *Science* editors propose six areas of scientific research that promise exciting results in 1997: cancer research [dudsville since Nixon's War on Cancer]; the search for matter's most fundamental particles [way too expensive—ask those unemployed SSC boys in Waxahachie]; programs that breach computer security codes [where's Case when we need him?]; synthetic carbohydrates that may lead to new drugs [and whole new black economies!]; quantum computers; and high-energy x-rays that will enable scientists to peer with more accuracy at the processes of life. Another sidebar offers a scorecard on how last year's *Science* forecast fared.

"Formerly called 'The Molecule of the Year', this year's 'Breakthrough of the Year' is the eighth since *Science* inaugurated the feature in 1989. The editors of *Science* honor those advances that break new scientific ground, unite different scientific fields, and offer great potential benefits to society. [As scientists, why should *we* be obliged to bring up the great potential *harms* to society? Let me slip these comfy blinders on while you sign that checkbook, Congressman. . . .] This year, for the first time, the editors invited visitors to the magazine's Web site to nominate candidates for 'Breakthrough of the Year'. [But don't worry—science isn't in any danger of becoming a democracy!] The ultimate decision, however, was made by the editors, led by *Science's* editor-in-chief, Floyd E. Bloom, M.D., of Scripps Research Institute in La Jolla, California." ◙



At the City Limits of Fate

Michael Bishop

"A book of such astonishing accomplishment and variety, Michael Bishop appears to speak in tongues. No other writer can pull off the impossibly delicate balance of wit, charity, poetry and perception that Bishop does. He does it with mirrors and jewels, cats and snakes." —Karen Joy Fowler

"Forrest Gump's mother, in her eternal insipidity, insisted that life is like a box of chocolates. It isn't. But Michael Bishop's new short-story collection, I quickly discovered, does resemble a box of chocolates. But be warned, however, the confectioner is a bit of a madman and something of a sorcerer, and when you bite into one of these goodies, you never know what's going to fly out: a Japanese demon, a malevolent butterfly, a numinous cat, a blob of Savior's blood. *At the City Limits of Fate* is habit-forming and delicious. Eat up." —James Morrow

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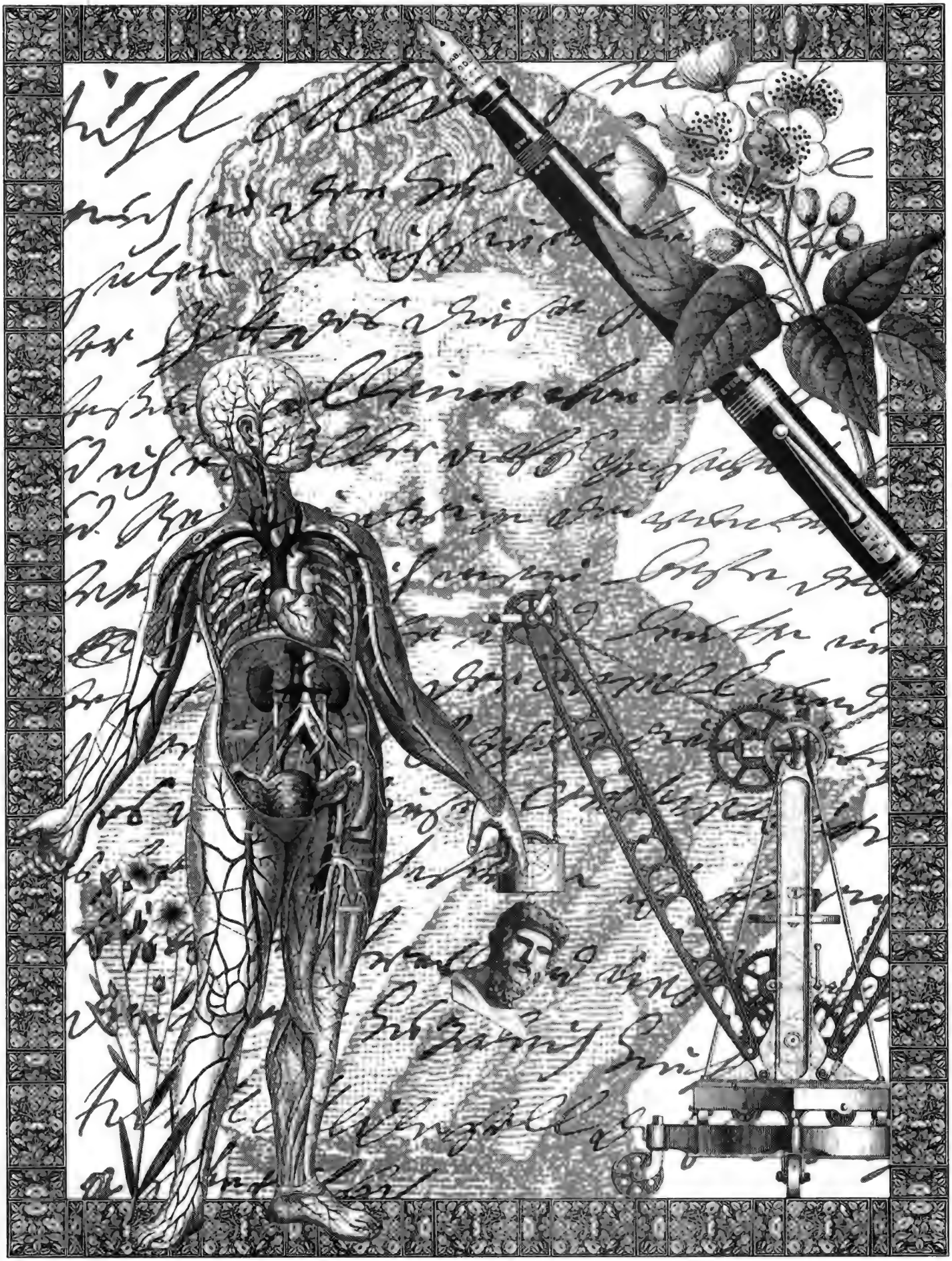

Writing from the Body

by
Nicola Griffith

Illustrated by
Freddie Baer

In this essay I want to talk about Art, particularly literature, and the Body—about the ways in which we do and do not connect the two. It's a personal essay about how I feel about my body, my writing, and the various changes both have undergone over the years. Art and the Body are huge subjects with all kinds of branches and nooks and crannies. In what follows I poke around in those topics that interest me—the philosophy of dualism, cyberspace as nirvana, the concept of genius, the religious right—and see which pieces connect along the way.

Art, Theology and the Ontological Problem

Our attitudes towards art stem partially from theories first formulated thousands of years ago. What we think today is a direct result of what some philosophers thought back then. Bear with me while I take a quick historical tour.

Plato was one of the first to talk about dualism, the theory that the world consists of two ultimately different kinds of being: visible, perishable and particular things; and eternal, abstract and universal forms. Particulars are only imperfectly real. Full reality can only be found among universals. The body, Plato said, is particular and therefore imperfect. The soul, on the other hand, is universal; its aim is to separate itself from the body and return to the divine realm of universals from which it came. From Plato's perspective, anything that gets in the way of that goal—the escape of the soul from the prison of the flesh back to the soaring plane of the universal—is counterproductive. As a result, he didn't much care for poetry or plays because much of their beauty is embodied in the senses of the flesh—what we see and feel and hear. As far as Plato was concerned, the literature of his time was a base distraction, the fall of the spirit into the flesh.

Aristotle saw things a bit differently. Every individual substance (except god) is made of both matter *and* form, and form, for example the human soul, cannot exist without matter, for example the body. This fusion of the particular with the universal was in direct contradiction to Plato. However, Aristotle still thought the soul/form was infinitely superior to the body/matter. He viewed labor of the mind as much more worthy than physical labor, which he considered vulgar and fit only for slaves (who were conveniently left out of all these deliberations). So, unlike Plato, Aristotle saw nothing inherently wrong with poetry and plays. Quite the opposite. Living, he said, is only justified because it makes contemplation possible. (Aristotle practiced what he preached. His contemplations on theatre led to a definition of tragedy, and its purpose—to evoke the emotions of pity and sorrow—and incidentally introduced that knotty little word, catharsis, into our vocabulary.)

The arts of Greece and then Rome flourished while philosophers teetered back and forth between the Platonic and Aristotelian traditions. And then St. Paul arrived.

Paul came from the Judaic tradition of further splitting the spirit into equal and opposing forces of evil and good. He came to Rome newly Christianized, and decided his Judaic theology would fit nicely with Plato's ideas of the soul trying to better itself by separating from the body. Evil, Paul declared (and, oh, we are still feeling the consequences of that declaration today) must manifest itself *in* the physical. The body, with its needs and functions, is evil, something from which we should seek to distance ourselves. The more physical and messy the body, it seemed, the more evil the person. Which means, of course, that as women bleed on a regular basis, and give birth, we were seen to be more closely anchored than men to the less desirable physical realm. (Funny how the exudations of men are never seen as unclean.) This, of course, strengthened the already prevalent view that women are lesser beings: less evolved, less close to the divine. Thank you, St. Paul.

In the fourth century, Augustine, an ambitious colonial lad from Tagaste in North Africa, trained as a rhetorician and travelled to the big city to earn fame and fortune. In Carthage and then Rome he tried on a variety of ways to look at the world, from the wild theology of the Manicheans to the rather juiceless philosophy of Neo-Platonists. Then he became a bishop and got a good dose of St. Paul.

In 410 Augustine witnessed the sack of Rome by Alaric the Goth. Alaric boasted that he had been able to destroy what had once been the mightiest city on earth because the Romans had abandoned their gods for Christianity. No

doubt this boosted Augustine's blood pressure. At any rate, it turned his brain into the organic equivalent of a supercollider: all the conflicting theories he had absorbed over the years picked up speed, went whizzing around his neurones, and came smashing together in his head. The product was *De Civitate Dei,* his most famous work. Rome, Augustine said, fell *because* of its original paganism, *because* of its inherent short-comings and moral perversions. It was part of the "city of this world", the physical manifestation of pride and corruption. It didn't matter what happened to worldly cities, he said, all that counted was the City of God, the society of mind/soul/spirit of those chosen by God for the future Kingdom of Heaven. What we did, physically, was almost irrelevant.

During the first millennium of Christianity, then, art was dedicated to the glory of god, to the spiritual being, not the physical. At this time, art was produced not by individual "artists" but by artisans, an interchangeable class. The work was what was important, not the creator of that work. In Christian Europe, poems were firmly oral in tradition, anonymous. Visual art and sculpture went largely unsigned.

But these artisans, the people who laid the stones of the vast gothic cathedrals, who sculpted and painted and carved, were not educated in the finer points of theology and philosophy. When they decorated the cathedrals they carved angels and saints, yes, but they also labored over gargoyles and griffins, sheena-na-gigs and coiling serpents: pagan symbols. The inevitable backlash came from the Abbey of Cluny (founded in 910). "Paganism!" they cried. "Something must be done!" They reasoned that if monstrous, evil figures were all these artisans could come up with to decorate churches then that decoration must stop. The church must move away from these manifestations of evil and return to the wholly spiritual, that is, plain, unadorned houses of worship. They said, in effect, that the aesthetic was evil. It was a revolution within the church against art. However, luckily for Western Civilization As We Know It, the Abbey of Cluny was closely allied with several doomed power struggles within the church; when Cluny fell, so did its revolution. At least in that particular manifestation.

In thirteenth century Italy, Thomas Aquinas re-examined the Augustinian tradition and decided that the Neo-Platonist parts did not make much sense. He recast Augustine's work, slanting it much more towards the Aristotelian bias. (Remember, Aristotle was the one who said that only in contemplation and moral action do people—unless they are slaves doomed to all that nasty sweaty physical labor—attain true freedom.) Art became good for its own sake again, and flourished, and flowered into the Italian Renaissance. With the Renaissance came the rise of individualism, and the idea of creative genius: individuals who sometimes transcended tradition to produce new works, and signed them.

The backlash to this was, of course, the Reformation, and the puritans with their Cluny-like insistence upon a zero aesthetic: black and white clothes, no dancing, no singing, no painting, no beauty. Art as corruption. (Don't smile smugly yet. The Puritans were not the last to think this way.)

Obviously, not everyone saw art as anathema. However, no matter how reworked, recast and revised the philosophy (and Descartes fooled with it after Aquinas), it was still essentially Dualism. Art was still linked with religion, still perceived to be the realm of the divine. Great Art, ran the conventional wisdom, is produced by Great Artists who are great because they transcend the flesh, reach beyond the physical to the spiritual. Except (what a surprise) where women were concerned. "You women," we were told, "are too close to your animal nature, so you can't transcend it, so you can't produce art." No matter what else got rewritten, *that* particular legacy was never questioned.

This general mind-set, only slightly mutated, is with us today. Our conventional wisdom says that Great Literature is produced by Great Writers. Great Writers are those who transcend the mundane and speak the great universal truth.

My Truths, or Some of Them

The conventional wisdom is nonsense. There is no universal truth. There are only many different and individual truths. It's my belief that we write about what interests, fascinates and obsesses us. We hope that by doing so we can show our readers part of our world view, help others to understand our own particular truth. Who we are—what we

have done, how we have been treated and how we feel about that—determines our truth and, therefore, what we want to write about.

Let me tell you some of my particular truth.

I have always enjoyed my body. I grew up using and pleasuring it hard. I played tennis, did gymnastics, competed on the track. I worked as a laborer with pick axe, shovel and wheelbarrow at an archaeological dig. I dug trenches and planted trees for the city council. I studied karate and taught women's self defence. I had three lovers as well as my live-in partner. Drank whiskey, ate magic mushrooms, took a lot of speed, sang in a band half the night, went home with one woman or another and cycled to work at dawn after no sleep. I was invulnerable, unconquerable (probably insufferable). The fiction I wrote was physical: explosions, travel through space and time, fantasy figures rescuing fairy tale characters, and so on.

But then I became ill. My body became less able, began to change. Eventually, in 1993, I was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis.

We receive information two ways: somatically and extrasomatically. We can find out about the weather by going outside and seeing the bright sun with our eyes, feeling the heat on our skins. Or we can use our modem or newspaper or TV or radio to get the weather report. My personal preference, where possible, is for somatic information. It is what interests me, what I write from. I write from my body, but my body has changed. My writing has changed, too.

I have relapsing-remitting multiple sclerosis. This means that every now and again my immune system goes awry and attacks the myelin sheathing on the neurones of brain and spinal cord, and I wake up with something not working: a leg, or an arm, maybe both. Maybe my balance is so screwed up I can do nothing but hunch over a bowl and vomit. Sometimes my eyes get weird. Or my mind: once I was in the middle of writing a novelette and I couldn't remember my characters' names. Most of the time, I recover from whatever it is that has gone wrong, but each time I lose a little more. As of this writing, I can walk (I can no longer run, not even to save my life). Sometimes I can walk far and fast, other times it's an effort to walk to the door.

I sit still outside more often than I ever used to. Much of the time, I watch the sky. Jeep, the world of my first novel, *Ammonite,* is full of sky. Busy sky, blank sky, imminent sky. And clouds: clouds like broaching salmon, like the scum that gathers on the surface of boiling lentils; overcasts like polished pewter; thunderheads like lumps of zinc and magnesium. I use the sky to reflect the emotional states of my characters. I sometimes wonder what I would have put in place of those skies if I had not spent so many hours sitting still, learning about what went on over my head.

And sometimes I wonder if I would have written *Ammonite* at all if I had not become ill. Certainly, I would have started the book, and it would have been about a women-only world, but there might not have been a virus, and without the virus everyone and everything in that book would have been different.

When I was first ill in 1989, in the UK, I was misdiagnosed with myalgic encephalomyelitis, a chronic disease of the immune system. When I moved to this country, that misdiagnosis was exchanged for another: chronic fatigue and immune dysfunction syndrome. All anyone knew about either of these two conditions was that a retrovirus *might* be involved, somewhere. I started researching viruses and the immune system. I found a book about lupus erythematosus, a terrible and often fatal systemic disease thought by some to be initially triggered by a retrovirus. Women, I learned, were nine times more likely to contract lupus than men. And, oh, I thought, oh: a sex-linked predisposition to deadly infection. Catastrophe on Jeep would come not by fire or flood or alien invasion, but by virus: little packets of alien DNA. And I knew how the men in my book would die, and how the women would change.

Multiple sclerosis changed some things about my life. As I have changed, so has the way in which I draw my fictional characters. Most of them suffer a great deal, emotionally and physically and, compared with my earlier work, solutions to personal and plot problems are no longer wholly physical. In fact, they are rarely so. One criticism of *Ammonite* has been that the confrontation between the Mirrors and Echraidhe was anti-climactic. "There should have been a battle!" But battles, the simple smashing together of armies followed by a

body count, no longer interest me that much. What intrigues me now are the minutiae from which such conflicts spring.

On a good day, I can walk briskly. I set off on a walk to the local park. Blood pumps vigorously around my body. Accumulated toxins are washed away, lots of oxygen gets to my cells, to my optic nerve, my eyes. When I'm fit enough to walk swiftly, I actually see more clearly. Things look crisp, bright, dense. Joyous and different. I pay attention to details.

On a bad day, unable to do anything but lie on the couch on the screened porch, or the rug in the living room, or my bed by the window, I look out, and up. Sometimes there isn't much to look at, so I simply watch. I notice changes. The sliding sunlight on the building opposite; the way the shadows gather on sandstone or brick. Sunlight on the rug, how in the afternoon the pattern is a deep and mysterious red whereas the morning colors are fierce and young-looking, quite different. I'm not sure I could have written *Slow River,* my second novel, without that kind of observation. I'm not sure I would have *wanted* to write that particular book if it hadn't been for certain changes in my life.

In June 1988 I came to the USA for the first time to attend Clarion, the sf writers' workshop at Michigan State University. I had never travelled so far on my own before. The thread that bound me to my English life stretched and stretched as the plane skimmed across the Atlantic. As we headed down through the cumulus clouds of the midwest, the thread snapped, and it occurred to me that not a single person on the continent knew me. The sudden sense of not being bound by people's expectations, of being somehow outside the rules, was exhilarating. For the next six weeks, if I chose, I could be anyone I liked. But then I realized that this hiatus in my ordinary life gave me the opportunity to play a much more dangerous and high-stakes game: I could find out who I really was. Me. Not me-and-my-family, or me-and-my-background, or even me-and-my-accent, just *Me.* I was coming into this country metaphorically naked, without cultural markers. Everyone I met could evaluate me only on the basis of what they saw. Their reaction to and treatment of me—and my work—would form a human mirror. For the first time, I would see my essential self, stripped bare.

That moment of realization, of terror and exhilaration, prompted me six years later to ask the central question of *Slow River:* Who are you when you have nothing left but your inner resources? That question was modified by the fact of my multiple sclerosis and my consequent interest in another question: Once a particular self-image has been shown to be patently untrue, who and what is there to replace it? Writing the book, of course, did not give me the answer. It was not intended to. Personal experience sparked the questions which led to the book, but *Slow River* is a novel, not therapy. It is fiction, not autobiography.

Fiction and Autobiography

When I read the first lengthy review of *Ammonite* I genuinely did not know whether to laugh or cry at the reviewer's mistakes. "Autobiography," he said knowledgeably. Bear in mind that this is a novel about a woman who ends up on another planet and encounters half a dozen impossible things: FTL drive, aliens, conception by a modified parthenogenesis, rearrangement of DNA and memory via a deadly virus, and so on. I read the review again, trying to follow his reasoning. Light dawned: I am a lesbian and my main character, Marghe, loves another woman, ergo I must, in fact, be writing about myself. Astonishing.

All fiction is to some extent emotionally autobiographical. A writer will take, say, her fear of heights and write a story based around a character who has a morbid fear of spiders. The experience of fear by the writer is a prerequisite for the properly described fictional emotion. It does not follow that the character who is afraid of spiders is a thinly disguised autobiographical rendering of the author. I have noticed a particularly disturbing tendency on the part of critics to assume that any woman who writes about physical or sexual abuse is drawing from her own personal experience.

Why women in particular? Possibly because, thanks to Plato and Paul and all those other dualists, woman are still believed—however unconsciously—to be unable to transcend the physical and actual and soar into the realms of pure imagination. We are perceived as being hampered by our bodies, incapable of seeing beyond personal experience. Autobiography, the critics tell us, is not art. And as women are not considered to be artists, our work is more often labelled autobiography [1].

Thin violinists and consumptive poets

Have you ever noticed how ballerinas and violinists look similar? Necks so thin you can see tendons and muscles slide under the skin; collarbones sticking out like ridge poles; wrists like bundles of sticks. You could argue that dancers have to be thin (I don't really believe it, but you can at least attempt the argument), but why violinists? And why are painters and singers who are gaunt-cheeked considered to look the part more than their beefy counterparts?

Then there are the diseases. In the eighteenth century consumption was the ultimate poet's disease: the stricken became thin and pale, specter-like. Much closer to the spiritual. Now there is AIDS: all those nice artistic young men wasting away. Illnesses which reduce body size as cleanly as possible (or, just as importantly, are *perceived* to do so—those with TB cough into handkerchiefs; people with AIDS generally disguise their Kaposi's Sarcomas) are viewed as more aesthetically pleasing, almost romantic [2]. Gangrene and weeping ulcers are not. Addictions that reduce body size, particularly the opium family, are more glamorous than addiction to food, say, or beer which simply rots out the liver and turns the skin yellow.

It seems clear that we are looking at an equation that reads Less Body = More Artistic, that is, closer to god/the spiritual/the aesthetic. Women, of course, have to be even thinner than men, because we're already laboring under the handicap of all those nasty monthly gushings, squashy breasts etc. In fact, the closer women force themselves to the ideals of pre-pubescence, that is, pre-womanhood—the more we shave our legs, shave under our arms, pluck our eyebrows, use cosmetics that increase the size of our eyes, starve away our hips and breasts—the better we are supposed to look.

The City of Mind

Of course, if we could just shrug off our bodies altogether, we'd be even better off. Or so some would have us believe.

In fiction, some characters in cyberpunk espouse the superiority of the non-corporeal world. People are "wetware" or "meat puppets", merely the means by which information uploads and propagates itself. In fact, the meat strives to imitate hardware, sporting brain ports, eye-gems, and various prostheses. The ultimate aim of the human mind, some characters seem to be saying, is to upload, to become one with the machine—the machine being, of course, some kind of artificial intelligence. AIs have become our new ideal: dispassionate, intelligent, all-seeing and all-knowing. Omnipotent and omnipresent, like gods.

Along with the urge to upload comes a certain contempt for the associations of the flesh. Skin to skin sex is not as desirable as slipping into a body suit and data glove and jacking into a juicy bit of software. Friends are those you talk to on the net. Family is not even discussed. Physical communities are no longer relevant.

Whether life is imitating art or vice versa, this kind of attitude is all around us.

In March 1995 I attended OutWrite, the Lesbian and Gay Writers' Conference in Boston. I took part in a panel called Writing From the Body. The idea, I was told, was to discuss how the physical body—size, health, others' perceptions of us and so on—influences art.

The woman on my left talked about writing as and from the perspective of a fat dyke. Interesting and to the point. When she finished, the audience nodded. I talked about multiple sclerosis and how it has affected my work. More nods. The man next to me talked for a bit about getting submissions for the porn zine he edits. (Oh, well, I thought, there's always one.) But then the next guy went off on a huge rant about, well, I'm not sure, but he quoted a lot of mostly dead radicals from obscure parts of the globe and wouldn't meet anyone's eyes. The audience liked that non-personal stuff, the abstract, nothing to do with bodies: vigorous nods, one of two calls of "All right!"

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[1] See Joanna Russ's *How to Suppress Women's Writing* for more on this. Marvelous book.

[2] Multiple sclerosis is a not-quite romantic disease. It's "clean" but when we lose weight we often end up putting it back on again.

The final panelist hijacked the subject completely. "The means by which we can leave the inequities of gender behind is with us," she declared, "and it is cyberspace. In cyberspace, it doesn't matter which bits of your body do or don't dangle, because we can dispense with it altogether. It doesn't matter how well your body works. It doesn't matter how fat or thin you feel. We can form the perfect community of the mind. Everyone will be equal. The body is irrelevant."

The audience went wild, swept away in an ecstatic tide of techno-worship. I said nothing. Talking about the body in this venue had become pointless: cyberspace, it seemed, was the answer to everything. We were The Chosen, all we had to do was turn on, jack in and check out of the horrid, prejudiced and sordid world of the flesh. Cyberspace was heaven, the City of Mind.

The New Cluniacs

The religious right do not get along with art. "No nakedness," they say. "No nasty bodily fluids. No lewd and filthy sex where people actually enjoy themselves. That's not a fit subject for art." And they bully parishioners into banning Mapplethorpe's photography, and congress into debating the defunding of the NEA.

Why do they not believe in the body as a fit subject for art?

Plato regarded poetry as a step backwards. Augustine dismissed anything that did not relate to the City of God. The Cluniacs led a revolt within the church against all art. Puritans forbade art, and joy and beauty. The religious right and their political supporters—Newt Gingrich, Jesse Helms et al.—are just the latest manifestations of Platonic dualism.

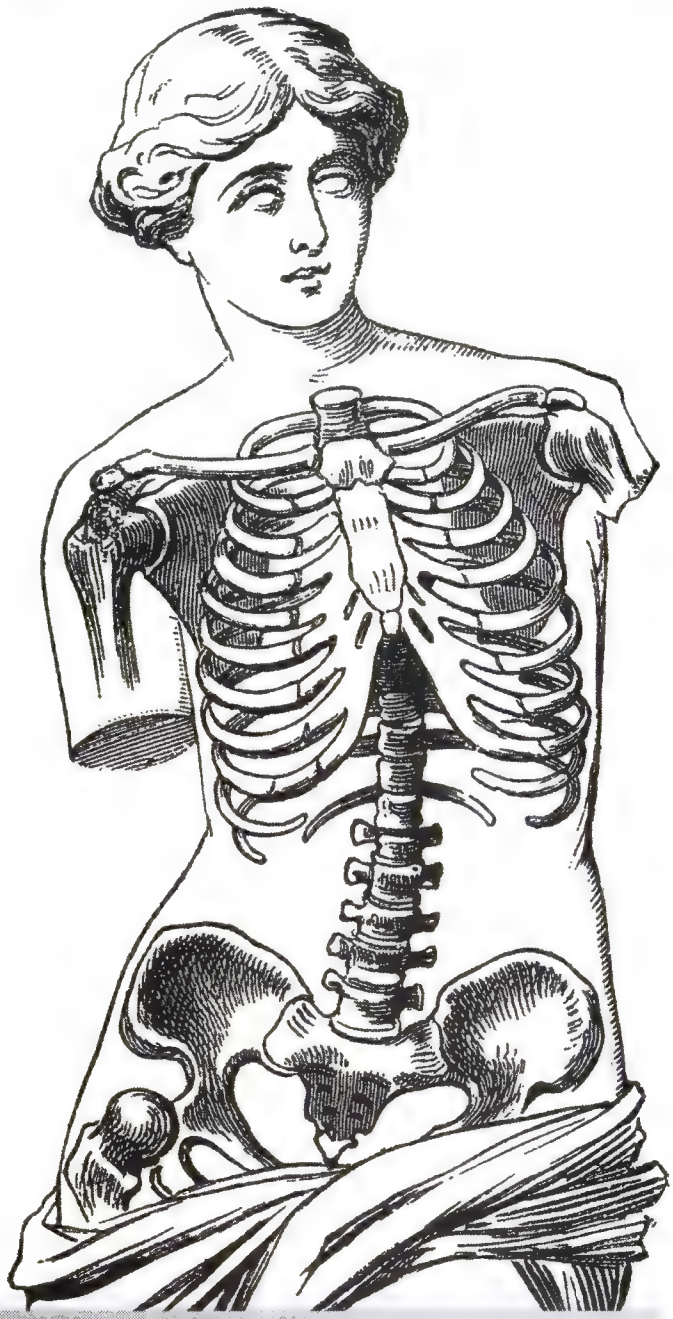
But before we sip our martinis and laugh in superior amusement at the clumsy rantings of the closed-minded, we should look more closely at our own attitudes.

Our aesthetic reeks of dualism. The whole idea of female beauty, that less is more, is lifted whole from Aristotle. Through Augustine, Aristotelian tradition informs our burning desire to get into cyberspace and the City of Mind. The concept of genius relaying the artistic Universal Truth stems from Aristotle's hierarchy of matter and form.

What does it matter? Sometimes, not very much. When I read wrong-headed reviews in which the critic declares my work to be autobiographical, I can laugh: only one reader's opinion, after all. I know what I'm trying to write, or at least why I'm trying to write it. But when I listened to that audience at OutWrite, I wanted to weep. Some of these people have internalized the idea that the body—and women's bodies in particular—are so foul, so impure and unworthy, such sad sacks of meat that there is no alternative but to look for ways to get rid of them. Some hate their bodies. They want to shed them like soiled clothing and live in the City of Mind, where all injustice will miraculously be left behind. But cyberspace is not heaven. Cyberspace is not nirvana. It is not even real. It is just a concept and a tool. A tool built for the use and convenience of the body.

I hope that while we all rush headlong down the infobahn we don't forget how to use our legs; our shoulders and arms; our eyes and ears and tongues. I hope we don't forget to communicate what the world feels like on our skin. I hope we don't forget how to build physical communities. The car has destroyed much. The computer has the potential to destroy more: why bother making friends in person when you can send email? Even our art is becoming less a thing of oil and pigment and more of mouse and pixel—which is not necessarily a bad thing, as long as we don't forget that there is more.

We must not dismiss our physical selves. The body is where we all live. The body—even imperfect, like mine—is all we have. The body from which all good things come, even art. ◘



DIALOGUES IN STAINED GLASS AND SILICON

by Eugene Mosburg

Illustrated by Darick Chamberlin

In January of 1983 I said goodbye to my folks and entered the Discalced Carmelite order in San Antonio, Texas. The brethren granted my request for admission with generosity, though neither they nor I couched the event in those images back then. I didn't have the comparison in those days to express our relationship, but it was that of a fan at a convention. A wannabe. An aficionado. And my people, kind as they are, and receptive to the odd movement of Providence, have this habit of giving their more persistent and earnest wannabes a chance. Maybe for a month. A year. Ten or twelve years, in my case. Some hang in for life, but they might as well be at a Con: listening to their favorite authors while themselves unable to compose an engaging story.

Beneath the honest enthusiasm for the new life I'd undertaken lay a fact that did not surface for more than twelve years: I had just run off to join the circus, the Merchant Marines, the French Foreign Legion. In a late 20th century variation on an ancient tradition, I had laid hold of the latch on the Church door with all my strength and begged for asylum.

I was too grateful to have a home and useful work to take much note of the fact that I was a pretty lame friar. Optimistic, I just hoped to get better at it. The grace came from God anyway, so the theology goes, so why not? I was fond of my brothers and didn't seem to be pissing them off intolerably. None of the problems resolved into a crisis of faith, so things would get better before they got worse. Right?

I was able to go to Mass every day, celebrate the great feasts of the Christian liturgical year, pray the Litany of the Saints, read the spiritual literature of our founders. I learned to live in peace and friendship with one or two guys whom I might have pushed into moving traffic on the street. No complaints; I had strived to do these things before entering, too.

Our routine was simple and repetitive: get up, celebrate the Liturgy together, attend common prayer and work. The object of our life was to give our undivided attention to God; the day to day rhythm fulfilled this goal as completely as one could ask. Unfortunately, it also presupposed a normal attention span in the participants. I just couldn't sit still in chapel for an hour at a time. I hoped and prayed for improvement.

And so it went during the early eighties, my novitiate year at a stone monastery in the calm pine woods outside Little Rock, Arkansas. Didn't know anything about silicon tech or silicon fiction in those days—though I did help replace a truck's master cylinder once.

The point of our life was not splendid isolation or indifference to the needs of those outside the wall. Our order was not only concerned that we develop lives of prayer and silence, but insisted that we go out to offer such ministry as we could. In the second half of my novitiate, I received a pointed introduction to the human condition. My best brother and I served as intern chaplains for the Arkansas Department of Corrections every Tuesday, men's prison one week and women's prison the next. We volunteered for this duty, indeed suggested it ourselves. One week a guard pitched a bloody fit after I passed a book to an inmate in some way he disapproved of. His hands twitched on his belt, in easy grabbing distance of his riot baton. His incoherent screams and threats froze me like grim death, made it seem very likely that I'd lose the morning's coffee then and there, from one end or the other. A couple of hours afterward, I relaxed again. The inmate had his book. Mission accomplished. The whole event seemed to mesh with the admiration I'd always felt for life on the edge, but how it would it ever be possible to integrate that side of life into the gentle quiet of a cloister?

After one year in the novitiate, I made my first vows and returned to San Antonio for studies in philosophy and theology. Seminary revealed itself as a regular killing floor of the spirit, through no fault of the school or the church; the sheer mismatch of myself to the work at hand served well enough, thanks. I'm a lousy liar. The prospect of entering into a *public* lie, accepting a responsibility for which I had no aptitude at all, kept the people who sell Maalox in business all that year. Too apprehensive even to give a name to my dilemma, I counted on the divine goodness to show me what I could not figure out alone.

The solution to this unnamed dread came disguised as one problem more. In January of 1987, the last semester before I received my degree, I approached my superior in a state of low panic. It wasn't often that we had the opportunity to tell Fr. Christopher how things were going to be, instead of the other way around. I had found that opportunity, though, and intended to make the most of it. "Father," I muttered in tones reserved for states of national emergency, dead relatives, "Don't expect me home for supper tonight. I have to stay at the school library this evening. And tomorrow evening. And the night after that."

He looked genuinely interested, waited for the explanation. "See, I just started a creative writing class, and the prof sez we have to do all our assignments on a *computer.*" I managed to look like a June bug had crawled down my throat. Fr. Christopher managed to look sympathetic.

Now my superiors understood what I was up against. I drove to St. Mary's University, made my way to the library desk, requested the appropriate software. It came on a small, fragile disk which did indeed appear to be "floppy". In the course of the months before graduation, I wrote short stories in a student computer lab on a beat-up looking Apple IIe for a teacher who thought everyone's stuff was "magnificent" and "priceless" (easiest $2.75 she ever made!). I became a certifiable computer nerd, too.

After a little persuasion, I convinced our superiors that we'd do well to pick up a computer or two for our houses. Our first machines were dinosaurs by any contemporary

standard; nevertheless, they fulfilled our expectations of productivity—and then some. With available word processing software, our seminarians prepared and corrected their papers in a fraction of the time required with typewriters. Our parishes put database applications into use at once to maintain their records. Parallels emerged, filled my imagination, between the preservation of knowledge in monasteries during the Dark Ages and the promise offered by a judicious application of computer technology to our community's day to day needs.

The problem of seminary resolved itself when I requested to discontinue studies for the priesthood. This is considered a *major* change, but in computer tech I had found just what a lay brother needs most, after the friendship of God and his community: an area of expertise which will allow him to step into the breach and proffer a rather arcane service at that unexpected moment when it will be most needed. Element of surprise: works every time.

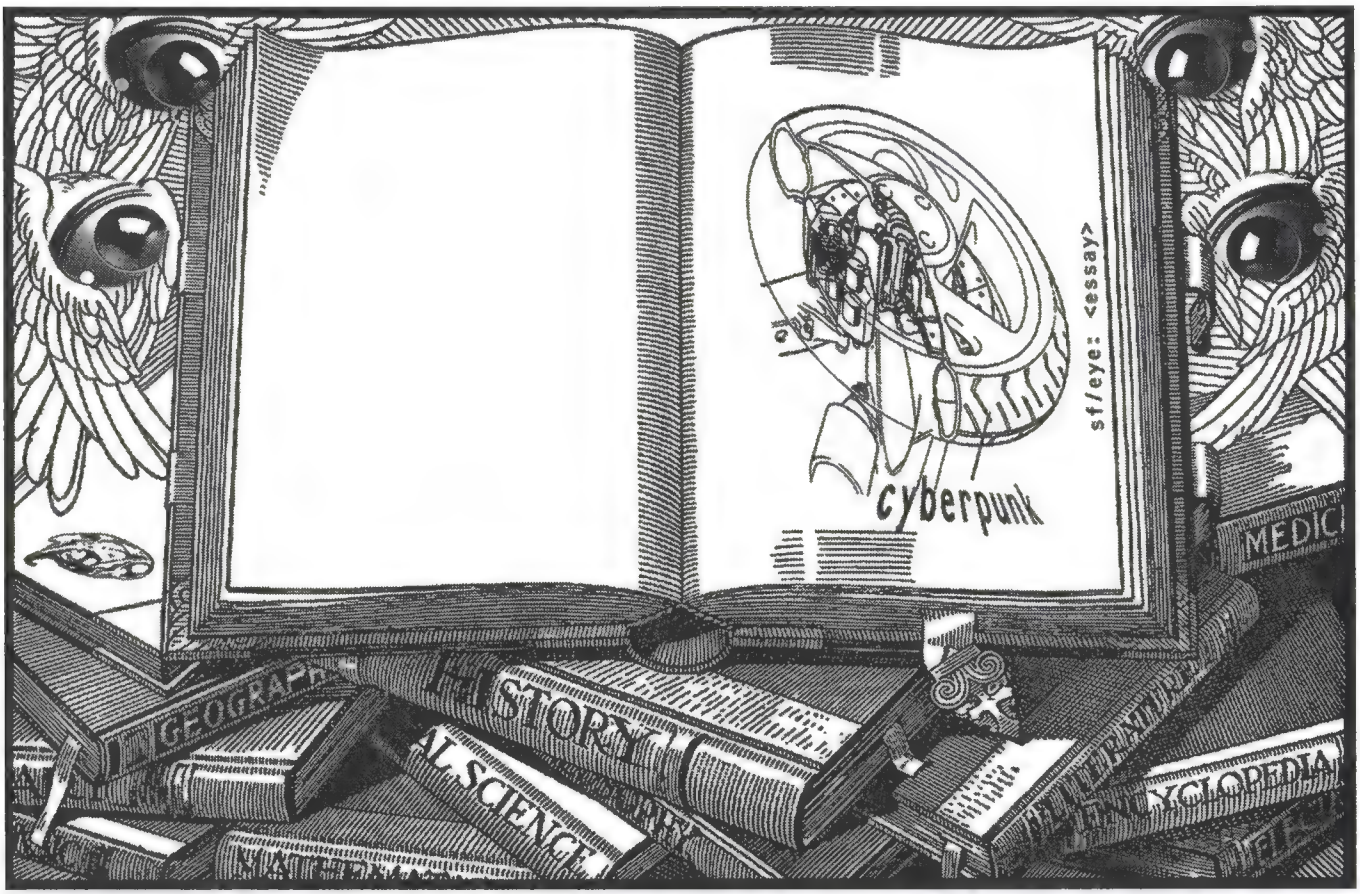
I began to work on as wide a variety of hardware and software as our five communities in three states could offer. My people wondered at these interests from time to time, but lay brothers have always gravitated to the more mechanical and technical side of monastery life. And computers are genuinely productive; our students benefit from text processing capability to such a degree that it's hard not to grant a PC its place—even in an enviroment that aims for as much simplicity as ours. When the subject came up, a smile and the suggestion that we could also do without cars and television was enough to end the conversation.

I made my way by slow degrees to computer bulletin boards, minimal e-mail and UseNet availability I discovered public domain UNIX-like operating systems, began to administer a Linux box out of my bedroom. Finally made the big jump, jacked into the Internet via a SLIP connect I configured from tender loving scratch.

Cyberpunk was just a word in those days, until an issue of *Computer Underground Digest* pointed me to a book called *The Hacker Crackdown.* After my assignment to our community in Oklahoma City, I discovered a copy at the Metropolitan Library. I devoured it straightaway, then began to scope out the rest of the available books by this dude from Austin. It seems that he wrote science fiction, too. Cyberpunk science fiction.

Crystal Express was unobtainable from local booksellers (I only recently acquired my paperback edition from a well-stocked store in New Orleans), but the library had a copy. These stories fascinated me on a level I'd never experience with the traditional "Space Opera" sf of my teenage years. Here in our community we maintain a lively attention to the transformation of the human being, if not along the lines laid out by Sterling's Shaper/Mechanist tales. Unlike intergalactic cruiser fleets traversing the light-years, the author presented a vision which seemed to tremble on the threshold of genuine event. Or perhaps he made the vision credible by sheer force of creative persuasion.

Gibson, Sterling, Shirley, Cadigan, Shiner, Bear: these men



and women have implemented Kings of Sleep on paper, each in their own fashion. They laid out for me, in paperbacks so affordable as to be almost free, "... the thousand things you remember, go back to, incorporate into your own vocabulary of feelings." Like "Twenty Evocations", word for word, including punctuation. *Snow Crash,* likewise. Sterling's fiction and his criticism. "Hinterlands" and "The Winter Market".

I revel in the magnificent evocative power of these authors, prescinding entirely from differences of ideology and world view between them and myself. I get excited reading "Spider Rose", when we arrive at the moment when Colonel-Doctor Jade Prime says, "... and those of us with long range plans are left to settle old debts." Sure, I've quoted in a gratuitous context—but it's a powerful observation in any case. It's a truth I live by, although outside of the context of a revenge-in-space-cum-payback I don't feel.

How come I get misty, broken up, even a few pages into "The Winter Market" or "Dori Bangs"? Bruce Sterling pulls off a genuine alchemy with this latter, lead to gold, glorious mutation. Against a backdrop of "death of affect . . . every aspect of the invisible war slowly eating the soul of the world", he sets one of the most moving stories I've ever read. I've longed more than once to make my way into his white paper dream, to stand on the edge of the black holes left by those two who went down into the darkness, to cry as Jesus did for lost friends, finally holler at the top of my lungs, "Lester! Dori! COME OUT!!"

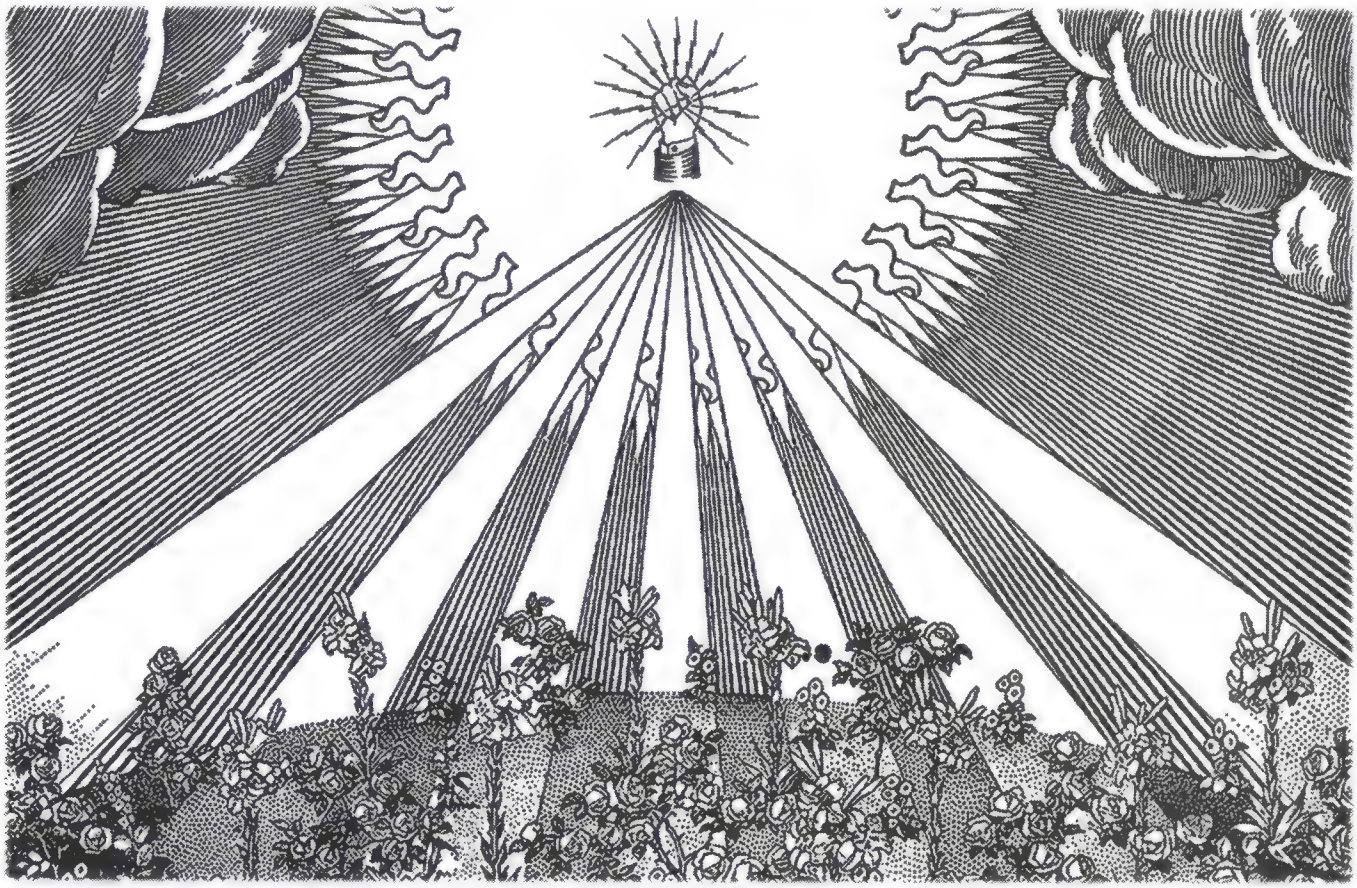
Should people look askance at my taste in literature, I'll throw the mainstream canon back in their face with glee. I've yet to see where a moral distaste for political assassination, blood vendettas, double suicides—even diabolical contract—has kept the reading public away from Shakespeare and Goethe.

You knew all this back then, when I was living out with the pine trees and chiggers and ticks. This is a story from our end, from the brothers, the guys who in the medieval days discovered late that the earth moves around the sun. That, should anyone ask you (and even if they shouldn't), is only half the story. Our strength lies in the fact that we will *remember* this celestial relationship years later when mainstream society has forgotten it, or chooses not to care.

Finishing up this reflection, I survey the wreck of my room. Everything's torn up in the mad rush of a move. You see, I asked my people for a year's leave of absence, and they kindly consented. I love them, will miss them. I'm proud of them. But I'm just not wired to live this way for another forty years. Apart from clothes, books and hardware, it's mostly a process of throwing junk away. That, at least, feels wonderful. It's easier to pray now, easier to hope.

The bus ticket in my hand promises a ride into Chicago at mid-month, then on to points east: two weeks of highway gypsy action before settling back in to work. I return to Oklahoma City on New Year's Day, late afternoon—exactly thirteen years since I entered the door in San Antonio, down to the hour.

See you on the street. *Pax vobiscum.* ◘



Panic Japanesque

A New Exoticist Perspective on Anna-chan, Audrey, and Idoru

By Takayuki Tatsumi

Illustrated by Aaron Brown

0: Enter Eurudice: Towards the Poetics of Hyperqueer Pornocracy

There is no doubt that literary texts have represented the most critical negotiations between sexuality and nationality. For instance, Clinton is the first president in history who "openly campaigned for the civil rights of gay men and lesbians" *(San Francisco Bay Times,* November 5,1992). Clinton won the 1992 presidential election strongly supported by the homosexual community, 95 percent of which voted for him—providing more than his margin of victory. If an American president is the greatest fictionist, and if it is not so much his politics as his poetics that would help structure the American popular unconscious, it sounds more logical that President Clinton appealed to neither traditional macho patriarchy nor radical feminist matriarchy up until the 1980s, but to the "hyper-queer pornocracy" highly characteristic of the 1990s. Clinton's presidency undoubtedly foregrounded the theoretical industry of queer theory, which has revolutionized the existing approaches to literary texts, reappropriating deconstruction, New Historicism, and Post-Colonialism. What I find most amusing, however, is a New Exoticist "queer" reading performed by a brilliantly talented multicultural writer, not by any avant-garde literary critics.

Now enter Eurudice the post-feminist Greek American writer. I would illustrate the most innovative politico-sexual poetics in the 90s with her queer re-reading of Clinton's presidency as an avant-porn, that is, avant-garde pornography. In the short article "Why Clinton's Foreign Policy Shows He is Good in Bed", Eurudice's basic point is that although President Clinton's insecure and uninspired foreign policy has gradually damaged his reputation as a "World Leader", it is such a lack of patriarchal leadership that powerfully demonstrates that "Clinton is a better lover than any President in recent U.S. history."To her it seems that if the world were the bed, nearly none of the past Presidents has ever "cared about their partner's orgasm". But, Clinton is exceptional, for he is the one and only president who "delays his own climax to coincide with his mate's". To sum up, Eurudice regards Clinton's foreign policy not as an opportunistic political failure but as a sexually promising experiment.

> Clinton is in no danger of creating future genocides, because he doesn't force the will of an elitist antiseptic Washington masculinity, via army or money or seduction, on to the objects of his desire. He doesn't like to choose, knowing that in our world the criteria shifts too fast to freeze it down to a prefab staid policy. Instead, he gets chosen. And we chose him because he looked sweet, sensual and lovable in the world of power hungry self-controlled politicians whom none of us could trust. . . . Like a tantric monk, he desires the very moment he is desired, the very thing that desires him. . . . What is most interesting about the tantric religion, of course, is that its prevalent form of worship is sex.
>
> (Eurudice, "Why Clinton's Foreign Policy Shows He is Good in Bed", *CUPS,* February 1995.)

Eurudice's analysis is amazingly unique, since this Greek-American Japanophilic post-feminist avant-pornographer not only "feminizes" Clinton against the past macho presidents, but also "Orientalizes" him as a Tantric monk, for whom sex is the most religious prayer. Now the United States is neither an innocent girl nor a macho husband nor a lustful slave-master, but no more than a queer transvestite World Lover. In the wake of queer theory perfectly coincident with President Clinton's non-political politics, it has become necessary for all of us to reconstrue nationality as deeply intertwined with sexuality, thereby reinterpret the discourse of sexuality as shedding light on the multi-ethnic unconscious of the United States.

Indeed, we have already developed a number of literary critical approaches to this topic. But, if we want to further investigate the possibility of American literary history in the 1990s or in the 21st century, it will be more convenient to single out the fact of one particular literary tendency becoming more and more conspicuous lately. While the 1980s saw

the international expansion of the magic realist literary mode in the wake of post-colonialist literary criticism, the mid-1990s begins to see the explosive negotiation between Orientalism and Occidentalism, in which it becomes more difficult to distinguish between one's ethnic gaze and his or her sexual gaze.

Now we feel obliged to reconsider the significance of "Exoticism" once again. Something exotic seems fascinating and disgusting at once. Someone exotic arouses one's desire to colonize and the desire to be disciplined simultaneously. Without this ironical discourse of exoticism, however, the United States could not have developed either its own literature or its own literary history. As we have already seen earlier, any racist and colonialist discourses have been nurtured by the double logic of exoticism, that is, the fascination and hatred of the Other. And very recently, the rise of Pax Japonica very naturally gave birth to a discursive chimera of Japanophobia and Japanophilia, in the context of what I would like to designate "New Exoticism". I'm not sure if this will be part of the mainstream literature of the coming century. But, unlike the pseudo-Orientalist fiction pervasive in the 1980s, which was full of stereotypes like Fujiyama/Geisha/Sushi/Harakiri, New Exoticist fiction seems to plunge into exactly the semiotic intersection between cultural understanding and misunderstanding, which I believe will constitute part of the American literary history to come. Let me illustrate this point with three texts published in the United States during 1996: Michael Keezing's "Anna-chan of Green Gables", Alan Brown's *Audrey Hepburn's Neck,* and William Gibson's *Idoru.*

1. New Exoticism Case A: Michael Keezing, "Anna-chan of Green Gables"

32 year old Michael Keezing has yet to publish a book. Keezing is studying with Robert Coover in the Graduate Creative Writing Program at Brown University. But, when I read the manuscript of this short story (published in the Summer, 1996 issue of the Canadian journal *Grain),* an avant-porn take on Lucy Maud Montgomery's famous novel *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), I found it subversive enough to deconstruct the existing canon of American Literary History from the New Exoticist perspective.

Basically, this is another family romance, in particular about the Japanese salaryman Masao, his wife Mariko and their daughter Anna-chan. You can understand the basic concept very easily even from the nomenclature of the daughter "Anna", who is nicknamed "Anna-chan"—in Japanese, any term of endearment is suffixed by "chan". As is the case with many postwar Japanese women, Mariko became so deeply attracted by the character of Anne of Green Gables as an aesthetic and moral ideal, that she attempted to imitate Anne Shirley's lifestyle and to reproduce the interior of her own house in the fashion of Green Gables, dreaming of studying at Holland College on Prince Edward Island. Masao, who has felt the deepest affectation for Mariko, wants to let his sweetheart achieve her purpose. So, when their daughter Anna-chan turns eleven, the same age that Montgomery's orphan Anne Shirley is adopted by the Kusparts, Masao and his family make their pilgrimage to Prince Edward Island. Mariko's fanatic obsession with Anne Shirley, that is, Anne-Otaku, has infected Masao so seriously that they make up their mind to live on Prince Edward Island permanently. Their desire motivates Masao to be a shameless moneygrubber, who does not hesitate to make a profit (with the help of his Yakuza cousin) on the sales of his produced porn videos loosely modelled on *Anne of Green Gables,* including one called "Anne of Pink Gables".

This project proves successful, making his family very wealthy. And yet, the more money he makes, the more Mariko desires to duplicate the entire house of Green Gables, with exact replicas of its original Victorian furnishings. That is to say, Masao's income cannot catch up with Mariko's expenditure forever. To resolve this dilemma it becomes necessary for him to make the content of the videos more sensational, more subversive, and more marketable. One day, Masao decides to hire his own daughter, Anna-chan herself—who has just turned sixteen—as the heroine for one of the forthcoming porn videos entitled "Anne's Humiliation". This video becomes a hit, immediately outstripping even "Anne of Pink Gables" in sales. Masao's cousin's associates forgive his debt, and forward funds for the next Anne production. And yet, life is always ironical. Now that Anna-chan has become a star capable of producing a tremendous amount of money, she begins to see this job as her own calling, just as Anne Shirley comes to find her own way of life in the long run. Therefore, Anna-chan refuses to stay on Prince Edward Island, and goes back home in Japan, moving into the hard-core adult video mainstream. Hence, the final paragraph of the short story:

> In the end I could not refuse her. Indeed, what other prospects did either of us have? Anna-chan was a young woman now, full of her own dreams, eager to follow her own path, just as Mariko and I had followed the tortuous path which led us to Green Gables. If Anna-chan's path followed back in the direction from which ours had come, who was I to stand in her way? It was, at last, just another bend in the road.
>
> (Keezing, "Anna-chan of Green Gables")

This short story could well offend a number of avid readers of *Anne of Green Gables,* leading them to accuse the author of blasphemy. But, by the same token, we should not ignore the fact that "Anna-chan of Green Gables" is designed as a most serious tribute to *Anne of Green Gables,* and that the protagonist Masao simply wanted to satisfy his wife Mariko's deepest desire for Montgomery's world. Therefore, however blasphemous the ending of the narrative seems, it is none other than the most serious outcome of the author's speculation on *Anne of Green Gables* from the hyper-capitalist perspective.

What is more, this Japanese family's pilgrimage to Prince Edward Island reminds us of the way the readers of Susanna Rowson's 1794 novel *Charlotte Temple* flocked to the fic-

tional heroine's grave and further signaled their cultural participation in the novel by leaving there tokens of themselves: bouquets of flowers, locks of hair, and ashes of love letters. The Japanese women readers of Lucy Montgomery are conditioned to visit Prince Edward Island and completely simulate Anne's narrative. While the development of Republican print culture promoted a Revolutionary heroine like Charlotte Temple and helped constitute American femininity, the expansion of postwar multi-media dispersed human pseudo-events like Anne Shirley all over the world and ended up reconstructing Japanese femininity.

Why is Anne Shirley exceptionally popular in Japan? Finding the analogy between Japan and Avonlea, especially in terms of islander mentality, patriarchal society and the ordeal of the entrance examination, scholars like Douglas Baldwin *(Land of the Red Soil: A Popular History of Prince Edward Island)* assume that it is the figure of Anne Shirley surviving the ultra-traditional society and establishing her own identity that has enchanted the postwar Japanese women. Since author Michael Keezing lived in Japan for three years in the early 90s, and married a Japanese woman who provided him with the details of the cult of Anne Shirley in Japan, he seems to have correctly understood this aspect of Japanese sensibility. What makes "Anna-chan of Green Gables" highly exotic is not only its avant-porn slapstick style but also its multinationalist reconstruction of femininity in the age of hyper-spectacle.

2. New Exoticism Case B: Alan Brown's *Audrey Hepburn's Neck*

It is coincidental that the year of 1996 saw the publication of another Japanophilic fiction, *Audrey Hepburn's Neck,* written by New Yorker Alan Brown. Brown was born in 1950, and lived in Japan almost for seven years, between the late 80s and the early 90s, teaching English and doing research on Japanese culture. While Michael Keezing's story took up as its central topic the cult of Anne of Green Gables among postwar Japanese women, Alan Brown starts with the cult of Audrey Hepburn among postwar Japanese men.

The protagonist is the 22 year old comic book illustrator Toshiyuki (Toshi) Okamoto now working in Tokyo. Growing up in a small town on Hokkaido, the northernmost island in Japan, Toshi has been fascinated by all things American, especially western women, since his mother took him to see *Roman Holiday* for his ninth birthday, an experience that left him spellbound by the beautifully exotic neck of Audrey Hepburn. Since then, Toshi has had a few foreign girlfriends, but nothing has prepared him for Jane Borden, his American teacher teaching Intermediate English Conversation Class at the Very Romantic English Academy in Shibuya, who strikes up an acquaintance that ripens alarmingly into sadomasochistic sex. In contrast with Toshi's adoration of Audrey Hepburn, Jane has been persistently attracted by Japanese guys, ever since she, at the age of fifteen, saw the most beautiful thighs of Toshiro Mifune in Kurosawa's movie *Rashomon.* Toshi's increasing hesitation accelerates Jane's neurotic tendency. Jane goes so far as to say she's "going to cut the skin off Toshi's thighs and line her coat with it, so she can feel you against her always". Toshi's affair with Jane ended with a burning newspaper stuffed through the former's mail slot; the bizarrely obsessive English teacher had become a pyromaniac. This is why Toshi made friends with a homosexual American named Paul, who has fallen in love with Japanese boys because he saw a picture of Yukio Mishima in a loincloth when he was sixteen. But their friendship does not become sexual. Later Toshi would find another American girl friend Lucy, who looks exactly like Audrey Hepburn.

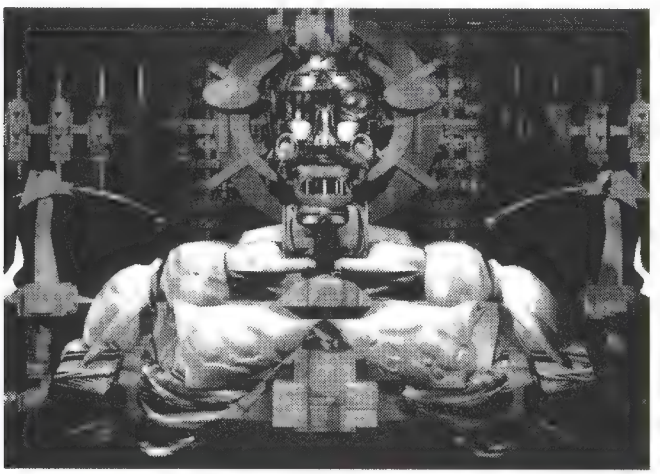
What makes the plot more suspenseful is that during Toshi's Tokyo love affairs, something serious happened to his parents back in Hokkaido. Immediately after the divorce of the parents, Toshi's father died. This tragedy invited Toshi's mother to confess why she has insistently concealed the top secret of her own true identity. Born a Korean, named Kim Chun-Ja, she came to know Toshi's father while working as a military prostitute for the Japanese army. It means that Toshi is half-Korean. "He can't stop shaking, and his lack of control—over his own body and his own life—frightens him." Toshi has been entranced by something exotic, but he cannot live with the idea of being exotic himself. Simultaneously, however, we can assume that his xenophilia had already been imprinted and nurtured within his mother's Japanophobia. Thus, the climax of the novel dramatically repurposes Audrey Hepburn's neck as an exotic fetish, which has been radically Japanized by Toshi's multinational imagination:

> Images appear on the white sheets. A silent movie screen, the voices of his mother and father drowned out by the rain as they move through their lives together, unable to speak the truth. . . . The screen turns a lush green, the fields his mother walked through as a girl. Toshi smells the spring air and the young rice plants. He longs to go to Korea to find his mother's family. His family. And to his father's hometown in Kyushu. There are palm trees, his father had told his mother. He drifts in and out of sleep, and his desires spread like the

rain-splattered patterns on the rippling sheets. Audrey Hepburn's white-gloved hand rests on his arm. Under blazing chandeliers, they enter a crowded ball-room. Everyone applauds as they dance across a marble floor that reflects their gliding image like melting ice. Her neck, wrapped in diamonds, is luminous, a white birch branch trembling under the weight of new snow. Toshi leaps into the landscape of Audrey Hepburn's neck.

(Brown, *Audrey Hepburn's Neck*)

Despite its humorous outlook, *Audrey Hepburn's Neck* tries to reconsider the impacts of wartime imperialism, which is not incompatible with the political unconscious of the movie *Roman Holiday* itself. The early 50s when this movie was made saw the heyday of McCarthyism. Nevertheless, the director William Wyler and the scenario writer Dalton Trumbo and the main actress Audrey Hepburn all had in common an anti-Fascist attitude. Eventually, the year of 1954, when *Roman Holiday* was first shown in Japan, saw a notorious shipbuilding company scandal, the formation of the Self-Defence Forces, and a Japanese ship's encounter with the American thermonuclear test off the coast of Bikini. On both sides of the Pacific, people were so depressed by dark years as to long for one holiday, that is, the slightest freedom. This is the way Audrey Hepburn's Princess Anne enjoying the slightest freedom captured the Japanese imagination in the early 50s. And, this will to freedom is skillfully recreated in Toshi's vision of another world, the snowscape of Hokkaido melted into the whiteness of Audrey Hepburn's neck. In this visionary scene Toshi probably feels a pull toward ethnic transvestism, making his own subjectivity more exotic, just the way the famous Japanese transvestite artist Yasumasa Morimura disguises himself as Audrey Hepburn. At this point, Alan Brown's own Orientalism beautifully intermingles with Toshi's Occidentalism. What Alan Brown feels most exotic is Toshi's own subjectivity desperately seeking for something exotic. While traditional Orientalism has boasted of weirdly misleading cultural stereotypes, Alan Brown's meta-Orientalism starts by understanding exoticism within the exoticizing other as correctly as possible.



3: New Exoticism Case C: William Gibson's *Idoru*

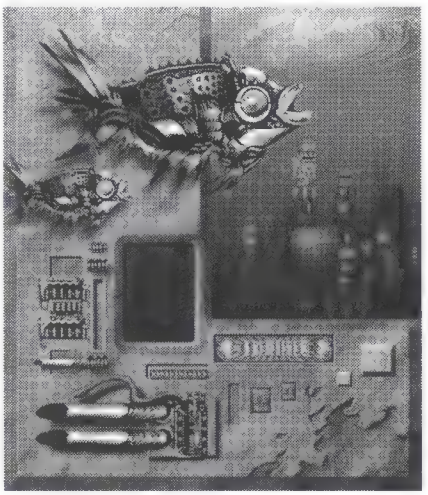
While Anne Shirley and Audrey Hepburn are both human heroines, William Gibson's fifth novel, *Idoru*—the companion piece to his fourth novel, *Virtual Light*—features the Asian heroine Rei Toei, who is not human but Artificial Intelligence reminding us of typical Japanimation characters: she is an "Idol" as well as an "AI-Doll". Certainly, there have been many Artificial Intelligences, if not AI-Dolls, in the history of postmodern fiction. However, this time in entitling the new novel Gibson did not misspell but Japanized the English term "idol", simply because he takes up Tokyo here as the central setting, closely focusing upon what's going on in its celebrity business as well as its techno-subcultural scenes. And, such a setting, once again, made Gibson's text perfectly coincide with what's going on in postmodern Tokyo. For the year of 1996 saw the publication of *Idoru* in the United States and the creation of a real virtual idol "Kyoko Date" in Japan almost simultaneously. Invented by Hori Production, one of the major theatrical agencies in Japan, this sixteen year old "Kyoko" has feasted people's eyes and ears in cyberspace, and is expected to keep growing older therein. In this sense, *Idoru* is another insightful fiction of the present.

In this novel, everything takes place in approximately 2006, almost one year after the post-earthquaked events on the San Francisco Bay Bridge narrated in *Virtual Light*. Around this period, nanotech engineering has enabled the post-earthquaked Tokyo to quickly reconstruct. Elaborate virtual spaces have been constructed as well, even replicating the whole "bad taste" structure of the Kowloon Walled City (Hak Nam), a place of interest in Hong Kong destroyed in the early 1990s (also at this point the text beautifully coincides with the creation of the latest Japanese "post-cyberpunk" computer game *Kowloon's Gate*, designed in 1996 and marketed in early 1997 by Sony Music Entertainment).

The story itself, once again, is a very simple hardboiled variation of the traditional Holy Grail Quest, centering around a couple of protagonists. Colin Laney, a natural born netrunner capable of discovering nodal points in the cyber-sea, becomes exhausted with a celebrity business conspiracy in Hollywood, and seeks another job in Tokyo. Chia McKenzie, the fourteen year old media-saturated fan of a Sino-Celtic rock'n'roll duo Lo/Rez, is asked by her Mexican friend Zona to fly to Tokyo and unveil the truth of a scandal about their common idol Rez. Laney's plot and Chia's plot are constructed in a series of cutbacks. To put it simply, as is the case with most Gibsonian narrative, once the story gets started, we are quickly invited to the "double plot" thematically and structurally. Colin's and Chia's unwittingly shared mission: to find out whether it is true that Rez, the Chinese-Irish singer, really made up his mind to marry a Japanese completely artificial idol named Rei Toei, the virtual product of Tokyo information designers. But, when Chia arrives at the Narita airport, someone secretly puts a nanotech assembler, a most dangerous

high tech weapon, in her bag. This act would involve her in a political conspiracy. While Chia seeks the rock'n'roller Rez, Chia herself is chased by someone else. But, since Chia is able to stay with Mitsuko, the social secretary of the Tokyo chapter of the global Lo/Rez fan association, she is also helped by Mitsuko's "Otaku" brother Masahiko.

Here let me reconsider the significance of the "Otaku", a new personality type more visible in Japan in the 90s, who "simply view their PC or television as another animistic object, like a rock or a tree or a kimono, which is of nature and hence of themselves" (Karl Taro Greenfeld, *Speed Tribes),* and who are desperately chasing idols, even virtual starlets. With the help of this Otaku boy, Chia discovers that the rock'n'roller Rez actually plans to marry a virtual Idol, through use of a nanotech assembler. In the end, Chia comes to know that even her Mexican friend Zona—so jealous of this marriage that she spread globally faked information about the death of Rez—proves to be half virtual. Of course, you can long cherish your friendship with someone else in cyberspace, putting on virtual bodies called "icons" and meeting in virtual chat rooms. And yet, it is also highly plausible that your very cyber-friend is neither human nor AI but someone hovering forever on the boundary between the organic and the inorganic. While pop stars are virtual, the fans of them could well be virtual—this is the central theme Gibson pursues in *Idoru.*



In the wake of Andy Warhol, the topic of celebrity itself has deeply pervaded postmodern fiction. Nevertheless, here Gibson draws a sharp distinction between the Warholian celebrity in Pax Americana and the cyberpunkish celebrity in Pax Japonica. While there used to be really famous people back in the sixties, now in the Gibsonian near future, as one character—Kathy Torrance—argues, it is the media that makes the assholes celebrities. Therefore, if a popular rock band like Lo/Rez sustains fame for years and years, they could be considered an exception, as well as "a living fossil, an annoying survival from an earlier, less evolved era." "Kathy thought of celebrity as a subtle fluid, a universal element, like a phlogiston of the ancients, something spread evenly at creation through all the universe, but prone now to accrete, under specific conditions." Now it is time to produce, at least in Hollywood, a radically artificial pop star as "some industrial-strength synthesis of . . . last three dozen top female faces". But, the Japanese artificial idol is attractive not because she attains the ideal of human beauty, but because she is part of an "iceberg of some unthinkable volume of information". To put it another way, the Japanese idol is being loved not as a pseudo-entity or a human pseudo-event in terms of Daniel Boorstin, but as a totally inhuman and imaginary and artificial character. As Greenfeld pointed out in *Speed Tribes,* as far back as the summer of 1991 the Japanese "Otaku" sensibility helped produce an archetype of a virtual idol, if not AI, called "Yui Haga" comprised of different bodies and different voices. "At concerts her face remains obscured and her voice is prerecorded. . . . Everybody knows Yui Haga doesn't exist. Therefore she can be all things to all people." Just by being non-existent, Yui Haga could capture the imagination of the audience, and appealed to their sense of reality as vividly as any other "individual" idol.

You may as well assume it is impossible to love any non-human semiotic ghost. But, think twice, and you will also understand that it is our increasing commitment to high-tech media that enables us to find sexuality not merely in humans but also in non-human software agents. And, it is this aspect of "semiotic ghost" that William Gibson, since his debut, has perennially elaborated in quite a few texts: "Fragments of Hologram Rose" (1977), "The Winter Market" (1985), and especially *Mona Lisa Overdrive* (1988).

Sounds queer? But, in the wake of the internet revolution, it is not ideology but high technology that has revolutionized the existing concept of sexuality, making it far more exotic. This is why in this novel Gibson devoted one chapter to one of the Japanese queer tribes recently labelled "Otaku", the Japanese term for a posthuman identity I mentioned above, which Gibson defines as a "pathological-techno-fetishist-with-social-deficit". In *Speed Tribes* Greenfeld conjectures that "the Japanese Otaku may be the final stage in the symbiosis of man and machine" since "they dream that some of virtual reality and digital compression technologies will allow them to have cybersex". To Otaku, then, the interspecies marriage of a human pop star with a completely artificial idol represents the most sophisticated form of man-machine interface. From another perspective, it is the figure of idol that will make all of us members of the Otaku. This is why The Joey Zone made his splendid pun on Gibson's title; yes, "Idoru" invites all of you to confess, "I-adore-you".

With the concept of such cyber-queer sensibility in mind, we can explain why Eurudice's queer reading of President Clinton's foreign policy sounds very charming and incredibly persuasive. Indeed, the rise of queer theory is consistent with the techno-sexual revolution in the 1990s. While in the mid-eighties Donna Haraway pointed out that we are all cyborgs, now in the mid-nineties I would like to paraphrase it by declaring "we are all queers". Thus. it is not that Audrey Hepburn and Anne of Green Gables paved the way for the Japanesque birth of *Idoru,* but that it is the queer marriage of Idoru and Otaku that would undoubtedly make us rethink the essence of classical idols like Anne and Audrey. Without this recognition of cultural paradigm shift, in which Japanese techno-culture played a significant role, we cannot fully comprehend the rise of "Panic Japanesque" in the New Exoticist milieu. ◘

how to be a pedestrian in irvine, california

by julia witwer

illustrated by darick chamberlin

Hitting the Pavement

I'm wearing slingback oxfords. They're a little loose, so I wobble just a bit as I step, periodically turning my ankle on uneven parts of the sidewalk. I'm headed for the Albertson's on Campus and California for some vegetables and a frozen dinner. Berkeley Avenue gets very broad right here and there is no crosswalk, no light. I make it halfway into the intersection. Then I see the car. It's a slate-blue sedan, a little dusty and unreal in the haze. I think it's a Honda. I glance at the young driver and execute my crossing protocol—look right into his eyes—Hi there, I'll be movin' right on through, thanks now. And the kid sees me, he *sees* me, and steps on the accelerator.

In Irvine, admittedly, drivers do this all the time. There are only occasional crosswalks bisecting major residential streets, so you get used to moving out into the intersection, putting the protocol into action, pausing for a beat to see if they speed up or slow down. Usually it works. This one, though, bided his time, slowing until I crossed in front of him, and only then bringing the force of his vehicle to bear, smoothly and expertly and without a trace of posturing. As the car comes at me, in that moment before my body can move, I look at the driver. Bland and baseball-hatted, his face never changes as he registers the shock on mine. There is none of the maniacal glee I associate with frustrated pedestrian-haters. Just a wealthy kid from Taiwan or Hong Kong, maybe, having used his special parent protocol to obtain the money for his late-model Accord and Tommy Hilfiger shirt. It's clear that he sees me, and that if I don't run, right now, he will hit me with his car.

So I run, and as I leap away from the pavement I feel my ankle viciously turn, and I spin around to shout but he's doing 45 now down this residential street. He never honked his horn in warning. Was he ready to kill me? I think he was. He showed no feeling, not even rage, driving forward as tranquilly as if he were controlling a John Deere lawnmower. After all, there wasn't a crosswalk. What the hell was I doing in the street?

Irvine I

Imagine: the street is broad, the pavement fresh. You pass eucalyptus trees, whose bark has been stripped in a manner so uniform as to hint at human intervention; there are lawns lush and green on either side of your father's silver Mercedes as he drives. He informs you that it is the safest city in America. I know, you reply, I live here. There is no fucking graffiti your father says. It's very clean, you agree. You can barely feel the road; you hear a low hum. The Latino man is pruning the trees on the sidewalk with a humming saw. There's no liquor stores, your father says. It's a good place to live. The Mercedes cruises so smooth that he never notices the blocks as they fly past.

The Vehicles

1. Minivans

The "family values" vehicles. These burgher-mobiles embody the Nuclear Family, both in their size and in their bulbous self-containment. They mill around heavy shopping areas, and generate, like exhaust, a spectral high-security version of a bucolic past that never was. It comes shimmering out of the fumes—shaven lawns of perpetual green bristling with rentacop insignias, secluded streets s-curving past the golf course . . . the pentacostal church's irregular geometry beckoning across the artificial lake under day-and-night surveillance . . .

If Gustav Flaubert were alive today, Emma would not fuck Léon in a fiacre. They'd do it in Bovary's buff-colored minivan, listening to STAR 98.9 and taking care of the mess afterwards with Handi-wipes.

2. Sport-utility Vehicles

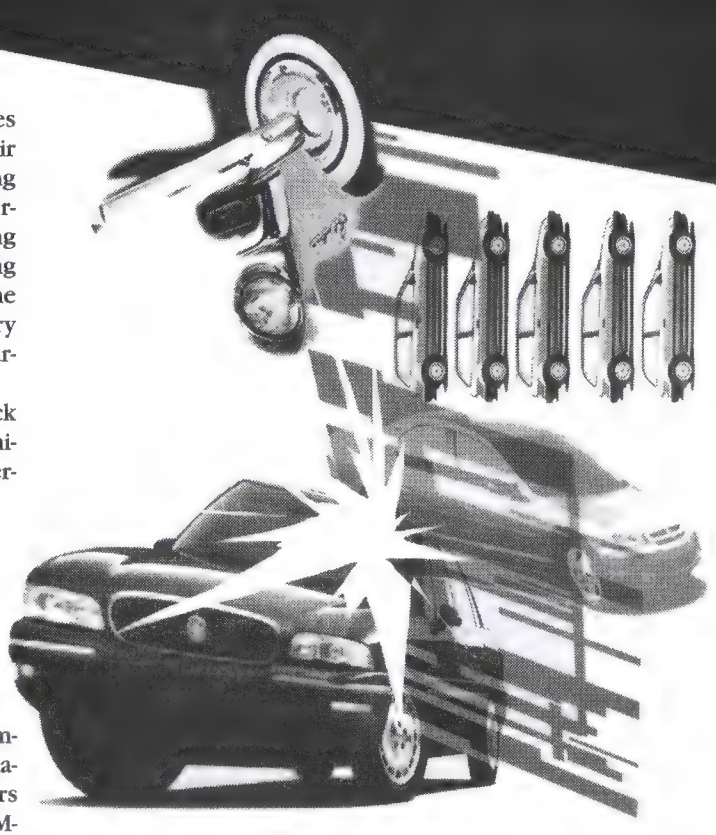
The end of the twentieth century is witnessing a return to big cars. All the mass that used to be spread out in a vast fuselage, finbacked and snarling-nosed, has been gathered into a wishful lay version of an assault vehicle. Whereas the earlier decades of our century spread themselves out on a thin film of endless fuel, our current fascination with bulk lacks this basic support. I think the drivers know this. They drive their four-wheel-drive hardcore HUM-V wannabes because they are protecting themselves from the knowledge that there is no largesse left for them to feed upon. The rugged terrain they traverse isn't under their wheels; they take the royal roads into the unconscious.

While their fondest wish is to make you nervous, there's nothing serious about these vehicles. These aren't the ones to watch out for.

3. Ghost Sedans

These cars are so uniform as to nearly comprise a brigade. The general preference is for hazy colors, indistinct and vaguely metallic; copper with a hint of pink, bronze with green overtones, arctic bluish white. While red and black are still popular, they are losing ground to these colors, the colors of smog, of mirrors, of a movie screen. Their engines propagate white noise; their passengers travel in an engineer's wet dream of seamless isolation. Embodied in these smooth egg-shaped forms is the drive towards an imperishable abstraction, a fetish-vehicle. Stewart Ewen has suggested that there is a touch of fascism about the aesthetic of the shell that hides the working parts of a machine. Here the shell manifests both in shape and in near-invisible color and makes a bid for its own sublation, hoisting itself out of being and into Being—essential motion, speed and silence that go to infinity. Ghost sedans have transcended matter; they are ineffable.

The reason these are the worst cars is because they proceed as if their motion were both natural and inevitable.



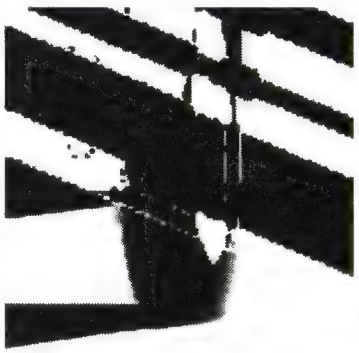
They are not hostile towards you; it's simply that it never occurs to them that you might exist. The drivers of these cars do not hate—they don't need to, because they recognize nothing but their own right to traverse their territory; you are simply a discoloration of the pavement.

Orange County Transit Authority

OCTA buses are surely the newest, cleanest, most modern and comfortable buses in Southern California. The newest in particular have a real flair; designed to transport you in comfort, with chocolate-brown velour upholstery and big windows that open, they bear a vague resemblance to chartered touring buses, the kind that let you sit up high on your cushioned seat, staring down at the subcompacts on the freeway and taking blurry snapshots of the Pacific Ocean as you drive past.

If you don't mind buses that run a scant once per hour, if you don't mind the routine closure or truncation of routes, if you don't mind not being able to travel by bus after nine o'clock at night—weekdays—if you don't mind being trapped at Fashion Island at 5 P.M. on a Sunday because you missed the last bus, then you should find no fault with the system. It's true, OCTA is a phantasm of public transportation; the bus is considered aesthetically, architecturally, almost, stripped of the unpleasantness of routes, schedules, and riders. But the chocolate-brown upholstery is so easy on the eyes.

Streetwalker



I am standing on the sidewalk in sweatpants, bags of groceries at my feet, at the edge of Alton and Jefferey, surely one of the worst bus stops in Irvine. You can gauge your relative importance to Irvine by the character of the bus stops you are enjoined to use. Along Culver Ave., a busy artery, there are occasional kiosks where you can take shelter from the rain or the sun. As you press North and East into Santa Ana, the kiosks disappear. Then the benches disappear. At first I was surprised to find the bus stops in the communities of Woodbridge and Park West as denuded as the ones at the edges of the industrial parks and the broccoli fields. Then I started paying attention to who actually gets on the 65 as it winds past Woodbridge's artificial lake, and now I know why there are no benches. At each stop, a small, tired Hispanic woman climbs on, her dress very clean, her face abstracted. They are all carrying their uniforms in brown paper bags that are neatly folded. The oldest are in their sixties; the youngest are not yet twenty.

The bus I am waiting for is the 175. The 76 used to run out here, but this segment of its route was canceled late last year. The 175 is a sort of minivan, often late, that runs once an hour. At five, it stops running. As it is somewhat unpredictable in its habits, I am often stuck at this corner for well over half an hour. Cars file past in the right lane, and one after the other the drivers lean to their right to look at me.

The driver of the Mercedes (bone) flicks a glance at me and pulls her lips together. I feel vaguely dirty.

The driver of the Bronco (black) pauses in his cellphone conversation to take me in. I realize he is not looking at me but is waiting to be looked at by me.

The next Bronco (almond) actually slows down long enough for the college-age boys to stare at me. But no one ever screams at me at this bus stop. In fact, what's most disturbing is the affectless glances, the masklike faces hiding something like pure computing power, pure calculation. They turn me over in their minds, as if I were placed there for their scrutiny. I breathe their exhaust. There's nowhere else to sit but this patch of lawn next to the sidewalk; there's almost nowhere to stand, out at the edge of these busy streets, with the vast strawberry fields facing me across Jeffrey, with the strip mall and Mrs Knotts Country-Cooking-Garth-Brooks-piped-through-the-outdoor-speakers sitting banked up on the lawn facing me across Alton. I am as offered-up to this stream of traffic as any prostitute wading into the street, and, in Irvine, as anomalous.

Rime of the Ancient Pedestrian

My having begun this narrative with my near death should indicate that this is by no means an ethnography in the strict sense. I am not standing back from the situation, impartial on the sidewalk or cruising the lawn in my golf cart; I am not a visitor from the future with the gift of teleportation. I am on foot in the suicide lane. This is the view from the pavement.

I am sitting on a bench on the corner of Culver and Barranca. I used to fling myself out of the juku, saying hurried goodbyes to the Taiwanese and Japanese students, waving at their parents in shiny Infinitis as I ran across the parking lot. As a rule, I would reach Culver and watch the strangely cylindrical bus pull away from the curb, slowly cruise past Claim Jumper, picking up speed and sweeping by the spread-out fortresses of the Crossroads Mall, Mervyn's in particular standing featureless and alone like a demon box. After this happened a few times I gave up. Now I sit for half an hour or so in the reception area reading *Condé Nast Traveler* and *Orange Coast Magazine,* and then I get up and pass through the glass doors—like walking out of a refrigerator, with the heat still escaping from the asphalt at 8:30 P.M. I drift towards the bus stop, not bothering to wave anymore, and wait at the bench to catch the 65, the last bus of the night, due at 9 P.M. I turn the terms over in my head. They warp from the fatigue: *noun declenchion, insubordinate clause, usage and idiot.*

Tonight the light is vaguely maroon. I watch the cars processed through Culver's lights and intersections; I can still make out their colors. Sometimes I count Mercedes, but this evening it's special edition Miatas. After the fifth Miata (blue raspberry) I notice a little boy wandering up and down the sward behind the bench. He's no more than five, wearing a miniature Raiders jacket. Just as I'm starting to worry about this little boy on the edge of Culver, an old man arrives carrying a paper sack.

The boy approaches. There are a few seconds of silent negotiation. The old man gives the little boy who is perhaps his grandson a sandwich wrapped in fast-food foil. Then the old man looks at me. I'm tired and sweating in the night. He's wearing a windbreaker; he's a small man but his wrists and hands are big, his skin very dark with just a hint of blue—the color of graphite. The cars roll by, thumping counterbass speakers on their faces in the trunks of Saturns (gunmetal), Firebirds (sangria), lowered BMWs (sage with gold trim). The man looks straight ahead; he doesn't look patient. The little boy's sandwich is greasy.

"We late?"

"Nah, bus is late," I tell him. He nods. "Of course it's late. You from around here?" I tell him that I live in Irvine but that I'm from Berkeley, and the buses around here . . .

"Bay Area buses, they okay," he says. "Buses will run you down Shattuck, down Telegraph, downtown Oakland, they

quick, they come often. I been down here twelve years, though."

I see his wrists; I see the way he perches on the bench like a bird, tired flyer, done with the day's scavenge.

He says:

"What I'm gonna tell you, is about how come we waiting so long for this one last bus, and how come this is the bus as we have it in Orange County.

"You ever notice how come sundown buses coming from Santa Ana to Irvine and so forth, quit running? That's cause of two things: Santa Ana is poor, and we poor. Riders. We under curfew. This way so's to keep poor folks from being on the street after 9 P.M. They figure no Irvine folks'll be ridin' the bus anyway, so they got no problem with no service. It's their way of making curfew without a law. Ain't no law says GO HOME, but the buses don't run nights; the buses say GO HOME; if you got no home, GO AWAY. Otherwise, you trapped in Irvine and the police come for you. See? There ain't no gate. But the bus is how they worked it. The bus is the gate."

The bus arrives. He's walking to the back with his grandson. He says to me over his shoulder:

"You be careful walking in Irvine, girl."

Strollorama

Actually, Irvine loves pedestrians. It does. Irvine considers its pedestrian-friendliness one of its great selling points. There are all kinds of places to walk. If you live in University Park, for instance, as I did for one year, there are loads of foot paths, yes, that wind between the whorled streets, taking you to tennis courts nestled in the green, swimming pools (residents only), the golf course (yes!), even the local Methodist church. Other amenities? Groceries? Well, sure, but don't you think you'd better drive the minivan instead?

The two facts of Irvine are that 1) there's no place to go and 2) no way to get there on foot. Walking is explicitly characterized as a leisure activity, and as such, it's encouraged. It's good for the circulation; if you do it briskly, carrying weights, it's good cross-training and makes a nice break from the stair-climber at Family Fitness. Irvine is spiderwebbed with lovely, natural walks, taking you around manmade lakes and through luxury retirement communities where you can smell bacon cooking and the bees hum in the jasmine. I used to go running in University Park, heading slowly down the blacktop under the eucalyptus planted in irregular-looking clumps across the pristine stretches of grass. The path took me behind and between blocs of houses. It was part of the hypnosis; I'd cross a street and enter the next iteration, and after a while I would become unable to discern the change, the shift in pattern that distinguished the houses in University Park from the houses in Park West. The ravens hovering and gathering as I ran.

One day I ran very far, I kept angling farther and farther out, following the path's serpentine around tennis courts, playgrounds; I was far from the streets, hadn't seen a car in ages, just the paint green of lawn and tree and the back end of the same semidetached housing unit again, and again, and again, and the crows chattering, and the blacktop rolling and twisting; I was very far from home indeed, and surely would soon come to the end of the housing development, but as I arced around across a stretch of lawn and took a narrow passage against a retaining wall, I found myself approaching my house.

There is no outside, I realized. This is a möbius landscape, a path that goes to and from my home, nothing more.

Warning: Nature

Of course, this is not nature, as you are right to point out. But Irvine also has nature. There's the estuary, and the belt of wetlands that circles the University (ostensibly to protect bird life; actually to prevent student life by foreclosing the construction of affordable housing around the campus). You can jog down by the canal and look out over the marsh and see lots of nature. In fact, there is an entire area dedicated to nature, an actual nature preserve. You might not notice it at first, though, because it's all behind chainlink, bracketed by two major thoroughfares, and threaded with wide sidewalks, which are also protected by fences. You can see bits of nature through the fence, mostly some tall grasses, some scrub, the occasional flash of a rabbit's tail. Off in the distance the green sweep of another housing development, safe behind the perimeter.

The signs posted at the entrance to the preserve are big and hard to miss: "WARNING: you are entering a natural area, characterized by certain inherent dangers . . . STAY ALERT!" The sign lists a prodigious number of inherent dangers, including poisonous plants, stinging insects, coyotes, an array of venomous snakes, and mountain lions. I have never seen a mountain lion in my travels back and forth inside the nature preserve. I've looked through the fence, but I haven't seen anything. Still I try to imagine mountain lions scheming to leap the ten-foot-high chainlink fences that enclose the preserve and line the footpath. Trotting down the ten-foot-wide sidewalks, going three abreast so you have to get out of their way, with their box radios making a sound that can be heard all the way down in the parks across the boulevard, making the golfing retirees nervous. Sidling down Culver to University High and picking up on little gringa sophomores, taking them out for a toke and a fuck in the vast veldt of Irvine's phantom nature. Build more fences, quick. "Stay alert, girls!"

I see the nature preserve signs as complements of those now visible out on the 405 at a certain crucial checkpoint:

All that's missing are some easily identifiable visual cues, black on yellow, their import quickly grasped even at high speeds. Instead of the silhouettes of a running family, their ethnicity clearly marked by flying braids and flowing bandanas, we'll see pictures of lion fence-jumpers, coyote wetbacks, more hieroglyphs for Irvinites to fix their terror on, totems of a city's fear.

Irvine II: Triumph of the Will

In order to understand what's going on here, it's important to realize that Irvine is a planned community. Actually the word the Irvine Company uses is "masterplanned"—all one word just like that, implying the existence of the verb "to masterplan", and suggesting that masterplanning is a process that can be streamlined down to a set of steps, deployed to solve any problem. Masterplanning is ultimately a philosophical act, disclosing an ambition to trace perfect geometrical forms out in human conduct, human culture, human habitation. But there's also a noun here, with distressing historical resonances that no neologism can dispel. What is the Irvine Company's master plan? And what problem, precisely, has it solved?

The philosophical underpinnings of Irvine have been made explicit by the Irvine Company, which likes to say its city has been modeled on Plato's *Republic.* In *Republic,* Plato's project was to create a perfect community, one in which the relationships between individuals and groups have been worked out in advance, and all growth, all change, both foreseen and accomodated. In Plato's *Republic,* Socrates asks the following questions:

> "Is there any greater evil we can mention for a city than that which tears it apart and makes it many instead of one? Or any greater good than that which binds it together and makes it one? . . . And when, as far as possible, all citizens rejoice and are pained by the same successes and failures, doesn't this sharing of pleasures and pains bind the city together?" (v, 462b-c)

Here, the model of city is an organism, "a single person" (*Republic* 462d); Plato makes unity one of the keys to a good city. This love of sameness, this allergy to diversity, is dramatically enacted in a city in which the homeowner's associations have decreed the handful of appropriate colors to paint your house, in a city dominated by a single architectural pattern in infinite permutation.

Circles are inscribed throughout Irvine's landscape. (No surprise; Plato loved circles and spheres because they demonstrated self-containment and self-similarity). Within Irvine "proper" there are several; ringroads surround the communities of Woodbridge and Turtle Rock, and a somewhat smaller perimeter can be found in the Northwood area. The most affluent neighborhood, Woodbridge, is traversed by a stripe of green; artificial lakes organize the living space on either side. The result is a profoundly symmetrical, even stylized composition. Similarly, Turtle Rock's streets ascend the hillside in concentric circles. These are less arrangements for communities than schemas for expressing basic philosophical concepts, ancient glyphs of order: nested circles and straight lines, onion layers of importance, high-minded sketches of the proper relation of part to part, and of parts to whole, a whole designed and built from the ground up to praise and magnify the Irvine Company.

The ringroads that look so good from above, however—from a Plato's-eye view—become rat-trap nightmares from the perspective of the street. On the ground, the overwhelming impression is not of an aesthetic coherence but of a uniformity that frustrates all attempts at navigation. Irvine travels in rings in order never to encounter the world outside, and this solipsistic desire repeats in tighter and tighter circles, more and more involute figures, as you withdraw into the wealthiest sectors.

Irvine's perfection is predicated on a series of refusals. While Plato's Republic identifies what is hateful in a straightforward fashion, Irvine forecloses it. There are no ritual destructions of the vagrant scapegoat, bearer of a city's ills; there are simply no vagrants at all. In some very real sense, Irvine is an attempt to make the word flesh, to make a city that resembles, to the greatest possible extent, its own blueprint. This helps to explain why the city is fundamentally uninhabitable.

Searching for Silverado

Eiffel Court: houses the color of cooked chicken and the sound of helicopters.

Golden Glow: a broad short street, a cul-de-sac. Hispanic men cart the dead leaves away.

Whistling Swan. Alsace. Morning Mist.

Nodes and bends in Irvine's digestive tract.

Autopia

I've had too much cotton candy and soda, and I'm standing right on the edge of Autopia. I'm waiting for my chance. The sky is as blue as a backdrop. Not many people are waiting in line and they usher me to my car. And I'm driving around and around.

There's the roar of diesel, and a white Mercedes blindsides me as it's shooting past. The driver is a 14-year old; the license plate reads "NIN RULZ". I spin out in Autopia, but then the rails grab me again. "Yeah, buster?" I growl, and I chase him until he gets off the road.

The day is hot. I'm starting to get a sunburn, and the Autopia vehicles have no windshields to speak of, so my hair is blowing in my eyes as I hurtle past the Matterhorn and peer behind the cutout facade of It's A Small World. I'm clutching the steering wheel with caffeine intensity. I speed past a carjacking on the upper concourse. I can feel my heart vibrating from the sugar in the cotton candy. Filled with inexplicable rage, I cut off a minivan that's trying to pull into the traffic, savagely forcing it onto the shoulder. I jam Queen's "We Will Rock You" into the Autopia car's CD player. As I crow my triumph, my eyes dazzled by the heat mirages ghosting up from the asphalt, I rear-end the car in front of me, and suddenly I'm gridlocked, we all are, all the rails are down, we're all frozen in place on the möbius strip of Autopia.

The speed mirages ghosting up from the heat. The asphalt mirages ghosting up from the speed. The ghost mirages of Autopia.

Crossing Berkeley Again

The graduate student apartments do not warrant a stop sign. Instead, we get a flashing yellow light, which is ignored. The average cruising speed on this part of Berkeley—you've just crested a hill and you're feeling good, goddammit, as you downshift into the descent—is probably 40 mph.

My friend and I step off the curb. The approaching BMW (butter-yellow) wavers just a moment in its approach. The driver looks at us with small, suspicious eyes.

"Don't hurt us," I say.

"DON'T SHOW FEAR! They SMELL fear!" He grabs my wrist and we step into the path of the car.

Epitaph for a Karmann Ghia

Being without a car is not some kind of moral choice. I do not feel superior as I wait for the bus. What I do feel, even after four years, is a kind of cultural dislocation, like Goldilocks trying to get her bearings in Mamabear's too-soft chair, trying to inhabit a set of materializations of culture that frankly do not recognize me or relate to me, in my carless condition, in any way. But I am explaining about the Karmann Ghia in order to be honest.

"Have you no car?" my new friends would ask, when I, fresh-arrived, tried to make arrangements to get to their houses.

When I was twenty-two in Berkeley I had a car. It was a '69 semiautomatic stick-driven Karmann Ghia that I bought from a weeping man who was flying to India the next week. The first time my then-boyfriend went to test-drive it for me (I was in the back seat), it refused to start. The man sobbed. "My car is shitty car," he said. "I promise you so many good things are about the car." I took pity on him and bought the Ghia. It seemed right; I had no license and couldn't drive at the time, but eventually I knew I would drive, and it would be fine; I would perhaps wear oval-lensed sunglasses as I cruised down the Coast Highway towards Irvine, sophisticated in Derrida and black leather; I would joyfully muscle the manual steering wheel around the gorgeous hairpins of Highway 1, listening to the engine that was too loud for music, ready to make a modest sum in grey market goods, selling kilos of Peets coffee—Sumatra, Ethiopia, Sulawesi-Kalosi—to my culture-shocked colleagues in Irvine.

The car was acid yellow. My brother indicated it had been painted many times.

"See? It was orange . . . before, it was white . . . shit . . ." He knocked: Bondo.

The car wouldn't start. Then it started, sometimes. I drove it awhile; once I learned to kick down the accelerator pedal, it was okay. Then, mostly, it wouldn't start.

My brother brought the car to his mechanic, a man he'd trusted for several years with the vagaries of his '82 Jetta (cherry red). The car stayed in the shop for awhile. The mechanic explained that the car had been driven pretty hard, but the brakes and tire alignment were good. Everything would be fine. This advice appealed to me, and I paid him six hundred dollars to do things. When the car still wouldn't start, I paid him a few hundred dollars more to do a few more things. Then the car came out of the shop, and wouldn't start; over the next several years it bided its time, eventually arriving in Santa Cruz, where, after a summer of vacillation, I sold it to a car guy for about four hundred dollars.

This is the sum of my experience as a driver, so I may be prejudiced. I mean no unkindness towards those who actually have driven Highway 1 in the waning light, and driven astounded under the borromean overpasses of downtown LA, and looked at the fairy lights of the oil refineries and found them good.

This is just what happens when you don't have a car in Orange County. It's nothing personal.

A German Final

Wenn du kein Auto hättest, says the test. If you didn't have a car. I take a look around the room at my fellow students. The boys bluff-looking in their fraternity polo shirts, the girls invariably smooth-haired and smooth-legged.

Wenn du kein Auto hättest, wie kämest du zur Uni? How would you get to school?

And I imagine them all, competent and incompetent, coming to this question (Please answer in the General Subjunctive) and stopping cold. ◘

Jack Womack

Interviewed by

Stephen P. Brown

PHOTO BY ERNESTO MORA

SF EYE: *One of your few short stories, "Out Of Sight, Out Of Mind", seems to indicate your interest in cranks and crank literature. Could you explain the true story behind the story?*

JACK WOMACK: Sure. It was based on the Collier brothers, Homer and Langley, who lived in New York and died in 1947. For the previous thirty years Homer had been bedridden and had gone blind. Langley took care of him, and every night would go out to bring him back food. Langley would also bring Homer a variety of items, everything from collections of old newspapers to the chassis of a Model A Ford—which was later found in the basement—as well as about twenty upright pianos. Langley would bring everything in and secrete it within their dwelling. They had a brownstone up in Harlem and Langley literally filled all five floors of the place up with junk that he brought home. He constructed little tunnels throughout and set up booby traps to prevent burglars from getting in.

Langley was pinned by one of his own booby traps, coming in one night. Homer eventually starved to death. A couple of weeks went by and people in the neighborhood noticed that they hadn't seen Langley hopping across the fence and running around late at night, so the police went to investigate and after a couple of weeks found them. Both had been mostly eaten by rats at that point. It took them two and a half months just to clean the junk out of the place.

This is one of the classic New York hermit stories and has always appealed to me. America does have a way of producing many more cranks, I think, than most nations—with the possible exception of England. Americans tend to have an exaggerated quality to their crankdom. Much of my actual source material tends to come from the field of crank literature. In the past I've listed Charles Fort as being a very large influence on me and this is absolutely true in terms of trying to set forth really peculiar occurrences in a very intriguing style. It appealed to me greatly from a very young age, while believing none of it, really. I tend to be very much on the skeptical side in looking at all of this, the field of how people observe and interpret phenomena and create their own worlds from what they see and how other people then build upon those worlds. In a way it ties in with the way messiahs are built. You're constructing something in which you have faith and you build an entire system around that. But at the same time, what are you actually working at? Like with crop circles in Britain. You have this peculiar herbal phenomenon which possibly has any number of natural explanations. But if you can build it up into some enormous system of UFOs landing and constantly taking off and then start imagining what the civilizations are, then you can take that automatic leap into sublime foolishness.

I always think of it as being the "left turn into Womack World" where it all makes sense up to a point and then suddenly there's a sudden swing into utter confusion and nonsense. This is where most of my characters can get into trouble, when they see what's going on around them but come up with theories as to why this is that may or may not be applicable to the situation. I think this is a common problem overall, that people will see something and reinterpret it erroneously to their own wishes. The methods by which

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I'd like to think that everyone reading this knows full well who Jack Womack is. However, on the off-chance there may be one or two of you out there: The larval Womack shed his tail in Lexington, Kentucky and grew his legs in New York City. His first two novels, *Ambient* and *Terraplane*, were published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson in 1987 and 1988. Shortly thereafter he and the science fiction community discovered each other. His next two novels, *Heathern* and *Elvissey*, were published by the sf publisher Tor. With his fifth and sixth novels, *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* and *Let's Put the Future Behind Us*, Womack returned to mainstream publishing with Atlantic Monthly Press. Currently Grove Press has issued handsome trade paperback editions of *Random Acts*, *Ambient*, *Elvissey* and *Let's Put*.

Womack's first five novels form a loose sequence with over-lapping characters that sketches out a grim and compelling vision of the near future. Though written out of sequence, they should be read in this order: *Heathern*, *Random Acts*, *Ambient*, *Terraplane*, and *Elvissey*. The concluding volume of this series is under construction. *Let's Put the Future Behind Us* is not part of this series, being a blackly funny look at incipient capitalism in post-Soviet Moscow.

Interspersed with this interview are segments of an interview Jack did with his long-time friend William Gibson for the Barnes & Noble web site. I felt that these bits work as counterpoint—hopefully, you do too. —spb

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this is done and the sort of things that can arise from it serves as an unending source of joy, and material as well.

EYE: ***As I sit here on the couch in your living room I can see floor to ceiling shelves filled with books on all kinds of human foibles.***

JW: The Womack Collection, broken into two sections: "Human—All Too Human", and "Beyond the Reach of Sense". Books on psychopathology, assassinations, cannibalism, teratology, lake monsters, ghostly trees . . . the very large flying saucer collection from the fifties, of course, and the Fort books in there, and paranoia theories, and forensics and various pathologies, both mental and physical. Things to inspire epiphanies.

EYE: ***Do you feel a personal kinship to some of these odd people?***

JW: Not directly. In fact I would try to *deny* kinship with most of them. But it's fascinating to study them and to see where they're coming from and seeing what they have to work with. There's the book *Best Evidence,* for example, on the Kennedy assassination. It takes a couple of vaguely worded sentences from the Warren Report and builds an entire huge theory about the possibility of Kennedy's body being removed from the casket in between Dallas and Washington, worked upon, and then re-inserted back *in.* This guy goes on at astonishing length. At one point I compiled a list of favorite books of mine and that was one of them. I described it as it being the Robot Monster of Kennedy assassination theories. It takes a couple of sentences which can mean anything and builds an entire complex world around them. Is there anything actually to it? Very doubtful, but the thing built from it is marvelous. It's like the misshapen pearl that gathers around sand in an oyster.

EYE: ***You've done very few short stories, and those on request. Do you prefer writing at novel length?***

JW: Do you feel like the real world is getting away from you—by that I mean is the strangeness and absurdity of reality starting to top whatever you might make up? You keep ahead of the game very well and I'd like to know how *you* manage to do this.

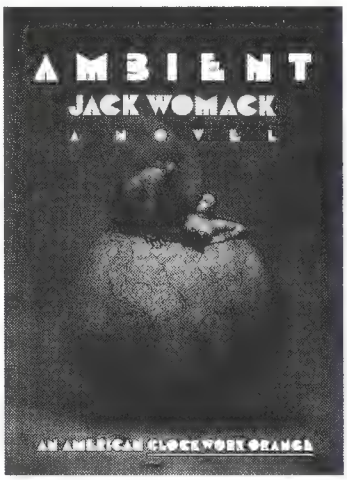
WG: The best science fiction of the Nineties is on CNN. Hard to beat that garbage-module slamming into space station Mir! That certainly wouldn't have happened in the sf I read when I was a kid. Bruce Sterling and I wrote a story in the Eighties called "Red Star, Winter Orbit", set in a dilapidated, rapidly delaminating Soviet orbital station. Looking back, I can see that we didn't go nearly far enough. I think what I try to do today is keep an eye out for a certain degree of extreme but utterly contemporary weirdness, and try to jump off *that.*

JW: It's not so much that. I've got a limited amount of time when I can actually work. If I do a short story, first I have to come up with a much sharper concept than I do with novels, where I basicly work from a broader situation and take it from there. With a short story I've got to focus on one particular central thing. It winds up being as much work as two chapters in a novel. Usually I'm under deadline to get a new novel done. So if I write a short story, I have to do it between novels.

But I prefer novel length at this point. Short stories are interesting because you have so much less room to get across what you need to, but if you're dealing with a particularly . . . pointed . . . emotional statement, I think it can be done more effectively in a short story. I'm with the school that they are basically two separate forms. What you can do in one you can't necessarily do in the other. Ambrose Bierce's definition of a novel was, "A short story, padded". I don't think that's necessarily always the case. But there's a lot to be said for that point of view.

EYE: ***The reverse is also true. Ted White has said that a short story is the emotional heart of a novel ripped out, with the rest of the novel implied. Which makes a short story a sort of literary haiku.***

JW: Right. That's a nice way of looking at it.



EYE: *When you first started writing, why did you use the future? Is there any kind of literary trend that you saw that was upsetting you, that you were trying to run counter to?*

JW: No. No. It had nothing to do with that. I had written two mainstream novels before I wrote *Ambient.* By the time I had finished them they didn't satisfy me. So I never sent them out. I was in my twenties, and the problem I was having was that my characters and the situations in which they found themselves just weren't working together. I was trying to rein in the exaggerative tendencies the characters tended to have, but they kept breaking out of the frame. They had fine energy in themselves but were overwhelming what plot there was, such as it was. Those first two novels were set in contemporary New York, which of course is satiric enough in itself, so it required but slight exaggeration.

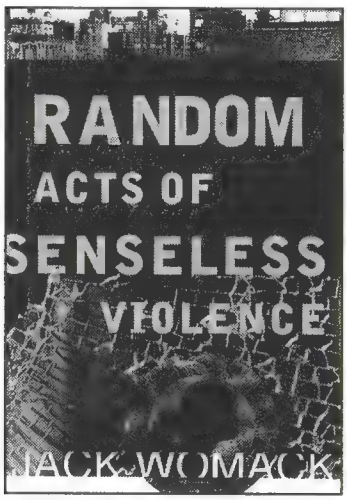
EYE: *You did not begin as a science fiction writer. You had read very little of it and were probably no more dimly aware of it than you were of the romance genre.*

JW: "Dimly" being the key word. I'd seen a fair number of sf novels while working in bookstores and thought to myself, what dreadful covers, which is basicly the same reaction I had with romance novels. My first two novels, *Ambient* and *Terraplane,* were sold as straight novels. Science fiction literature as such I only started reading to any degree in the fall of 1989, after I had sold *Heathern* to Tor, and after they'd bought the paperback rights to *Terraplane.* It was recommended to me at that point that I should start going to conventions, and read some science fiction. I started meeting people in the field and I was exposed to a number of things in terms of the literature both good and bad, so in time I learned what it was I had found myself in the midst of. I guess that accounts for my different point of view. I think I came to the field a little late to appreciate it in the same ways that many of the people who have been in it since they first began reading look at it. I think sometimes I see things in the material that I like that others perhaps might miss. I don't really get a lot of the things about science fiction literature that other people take as a given. But I definitely fell into the science fiction community through the back door.

EYE: *The science fiction world is an insular little community, barely attached to the rest of literature, and they tend not to pay a lot of attention to what happens on the outside. When your third book was published by a science fiction publisher, suddenly everyone looked around and said, "Look! Here's a new writer who just appeared out of nowhere!" So where is that nowhere? Where did you come from?*

JW: Well, "nowhere" is the rest of literature. My basic influences in writing were coming from non-science-fiction influences, from regular literature and from the Great American Crank Literature Spectrum, the pseudo-scientific fields, as well as popular cultural arts. That all mixed together and served as the main effect on me.

I know that the science concepts in my books, such as they are—I use the term very loosely—are not used very rigorously. Take the question of the parallel world in *Terraplane.* Several people have asked, "Well is this the *only* parallel world? Shouldn't there be a series of them?" But one's enough for *my* purposes. I've done a little bit—a *very* little bit—of reading since then, about the notion of shadow universes, that sort of thing. But I don't



come from a scientific background. It all sort of escapes me. The basic use of the parallel world that I had in mind was as a metaphor to serve as a different comparative world that these characters would pass between, sort of like a "worst case scenario", where as bad as things are in the contemporary near future world of my books there is an alternative which is actually worse. It struck me as interesting what I could do with the juxtapositions of a near-future world which could be ours, as well as with a near-past world which also *could* have been ours. But I didn't approach the idea from a scientific aspect. I approached it from the literary point of view as being an interesting sort of background I could use.

EYE: *After the Tor novels,* Random Acts *was published by Grove/Atlantic Monthly, who bought* Let's Put the Future Behind Us, *a mainstream novel. So years down the road you can probably look back at your genre sf work as a career aberration.*

JW: It's hard to say. When Charlie Brown was interviewing me we talked about this and he said he thought I *was* a science fiction writer, even if I never wrote another word of science fiction. I could see what he meant, in terms of my way of looking at the world. It's different, to see things as more of a broader whole than what is going on in my neighborhood or my house. How does a person's life tie in with the broader world? I think this is something that novelists used to tend to do. I think it's gotten more minimal, more close. But I think there are some novelists writing of broader concerns and the wider world—De Lillo certainly, Cormac McCarthy to a different degree, Pynchon, Ballard.

I felt ready to go back to contemporary fiction because the world has sort of caught up with me, I fear. I was having to set the earlier books ahead because I couldn't get across the surreal feeling I always had, seeing the world into a contemporary book. I think that what's happened is that the world has become *so* weird at this point that now it seems to work much better for me. Either that or I've just gotten to be more practiced at this sort of thing. I've got a better ear for how to do it without having the words clang flat or sharp when I try to do something contemporary.

EYE: *You started your writing career by leaping into the middle of a lengthy cycle of novels that would take you years to complete.*

JW: Well, I've done stranger things than that.

EYE: *Was the full six book cycle set in your mind when you began* Ambient?

JW: About half way through *Ambient* I realized that if I was going to it justice that I'd need more. By the time I finished *Ambient* I'd come up with the rough scheme for what I needed to do, and also realized that *Ambient* would not be chronologically the first in the series. I'd have to go back and forth in time between the books, which I also thought would keep things interesting.

At the time I began writing, I was completely unfamiliar with Bill Gibson's work. I hadn't read Ballard, I had not seen *Bladerunner* or *Road Warrior.* I'd seen the movie and read the book of *Clockwork Orange,* years before—and I'd much preferred the movie. But in the fall of '83, when I started writing *Ambient,* I was off work for about a month, and we had just gotten in cable, and it had just started playing MTV. I would turn it on and leave it on constantly, so that there were video images permeating the house. But I was just sitting around sending out resumés and getting no

responses. In the meantime this TV was playing in the background, and one morning I woke up and sat down and I started writing. Within a week I had the basic first six chapters of *Ambient.* It was very unlike anything I had done before, or since.

Without making a conscious decision about the direction of the fiction, I thought to myself, "All right, if it's the late fifties, how would someone in the late fifties think about New York *now,* if they were suddenly thrown into New York in 1983?" I realized just how utterly unpredictable 1983 would have been, seen from the late nineteen-fifties, and I thought, "Okay, at the same time you can look ahead in the late fifties, and you *can* extrapolate, but there'll always be the loose cannons of history rolling down the deck knocking things willy-nilly." And I thought, "Okay, so let me push up the action twenty-five years, and let me take everything that's going on in New York now and just push it ahead about ten times more so." Not necessarily worse, but just more so. The basic concept started from that.

I set the first scene of *Ambient* in the bookstore—Scribner's—where I had worked for four and a half years, a job I had just quit, having been fed up with it. When the book came out, I know many of the Weidenfeld sales staff appreciated that I had blown up the Scribner's bookstore at the end of the second chapter. There seemed to be great pleasure in my having done this. I myself was able to, shall we say, relieve certain sociopathic tendencies.

After I'd done the six chapters I thought to myself, "I've definitely got a *book* here." I wrote the first half of *Ambient* very quickly, by the start of '84.

Then I took a job working at a book wholesaler out in Brooklyn, in the middle of Bedford-Stuyvesant. Every morning I'd go out on the subway, on the *worst* subway in town, a ride that would be anywhere from one hour to two hours, depending on if the subway caught fire in the meantime. I'd ride into the heart of one of the, shall we say, more decrepit parts of town, where it was hazardous just walking from the subway stop to the place of employment. I was walking through broken glass every day while writing *Ambient.* It was the constant sound of crunching glass and looking up and seeing trees growing out of rusted elevated structures, and burned-out buildings and thinking, "Well it already *looks* like this!" That's how I was able to convince myself while writing *Ambient* that it really wasn't science fiction. I was transferring the decay in that particular part of Brooklyn into the center of Manhattan.

I tend to write a first draft very quickly just to get the action down. Then I re-write and re-write and re-write into eternity till the wording is right. I read it aloud to myself the whole time, just to make sure it sounds right and doesn't jar in the ear. By about the tenth or eleventh re-write of *Ambient* I realized there would be changes in language over time, and I deliberately rushed that. The sort of linguistic change that takes place in my books *will* not occur at such a tremendous rate, I don't believe. But this is the only time where I've actually proposed something that could develop in this way, because I think that as time goes along, the turning of nouns into verbs, the

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JW: **The ways in which TV has changed society—every society—are rather unlike what was predicted, back in the 1940s. Keeping this in mind, when you read articles or hear predictions of the upcoming online hypertexted internetted future, what thoughts and/or uncertainties pass through your head?**

WG: Television may be our only historical model for what we're heading into with this emerging hypermedia. And I'm not sure what that's worth, as it's hard to get a handle on what television's *already done* to us. And you and I were there for the *start* of that; in theory, we can recall the World Before Television. Not that we knew it was, of course, but that's the profoundly spooky nature of the game. We may, right now, be in the World Before SOMETHING. I'd say we almost certainly are, and perhaps it's some similar apprehension of this looming singularity that causes us to write much of the sort of thing we write. The world of *Ambient,* et al., is one that's hit some sort of major wall; the scary thing is how you manage to convey that that wall had maybe always *been* there . . .

It would be interesting to go back to the advent of broadcast television in the U.S. and study the pop-futurological response, the TV futures *Life* and *Look* and *Popular Mechanics* were putting forward. All those thousands of articles on the future of VR would probably look like the next reprise of that. Offhand, the only sf I know of that predicted anything that *felt* like broadcast were E.M. Forster's novella "The Machine Stops", and a wonderfully sad story called "Year Day", by (I think) Cyril Kornbluth, published posthumously.

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shortenings of words, the combinations, etc. will accelerate. You're seeing that now, but in my books it has just occurred at a much faster rate.

At that point I started doing *that* overlay and that's when the various changes start taking place in the language. Then I started on the second half of *Ambient,* and realized that I was going to have to cover a lot more material if I was really going to do this right, that essentially I was going to need to do one book with six parts. I realized I had my work cut out for me for a while.

JW: At time it seems to me that any collective sense of U.S. history has now been utterly lost—not that much a sense was ever that prevalent here, but there used to be in the minds of most people a vague awareness of all that has *gone before,* and I think this has now atrophied, leading to beliefs that bear absolutely no connection to reality—i.e., the Vietnam War was fought to free the slaves.

How do you think the absence of an awareness of the past affects a vision of the future? Does the average person often stop to consider his or her own future, much less the future of his or her own society?

WG: Something that hasn't often been noted about the digital, but which has vaguely worried me for years, is its plasticity. When I was just starting to write my first cyberstuff, I happened to run into a young man whose company sold a piece of software that allowed audio to be tweaked at some absolutely minimal level of resolution (I doubt if I'm making any sense scientifically here, but let's go with the flow). This was primarily intended for the music business, but I was struck by his pointing out that he could use this software to recut a politician's speech, have the politician saying anything at all, and the level of resolution would be such that there would be no way for anyone, even an expert with the best audio lab in the world, to prove that this had in fact been done, and that the "recording" was a hoax. For this reason, he said, audio shouldn't be allowable as court evidence.

History is a species of speculative fiction, of course, and we rewrite it on a regular basis. But the *data* of history, the source material, has more or less remained the same throughout, er, history. We just keep reinterpreting it. Sometimes we actually uncover fresh source material, but more often than not it's simply reinterpretive. I love that. I'd almost rather see what a given period in the future will think of our century than what that given future will be!

But something like the flip side of this appears at one point in *Idoru,* when Chia reflects that her mother's "now" is much less elastic than her own "now". This came from my own experience of meeting fourteen-year-olds for whom the Beatles are in a very real sense a contemporary phenomenon. The digital "now" is one long moment.

Though I think what you actually asked about is more sinister and depressing altogether, and yes, I've noticed it. I sort of take it for granted that it's part of the societal backstory in *Virtual Light* and *Idoru,* but that the characters I tend to focus on are somehow less like that than the people around them.

After I wrote the first seven chapters, I realized what I needed to do and I went back and rewrote them in the variations of future-speak, which allowed me not only a lot more freedom in the way I was able to get things across but I was able to pack more things into the narrative. I was also able to carry over the notion that this was taking place in a similar but different world. The more you read it, the more you get used to it. Ideally, that's how it should work. I always recommend to people who are having a hard time with it, just start reading it out loud, because that's the way I wrote it. That sometimes helps.

By the time I finished *Ambient* I had the basic plan of the other five, and what would be roughly occurring in each of them, written down, so that once I finished *Ambient* then I was able to go on to the next. I suggested to Weidenfeld doing *Heathern* next, and they said, "Why don't you do something like *Ambient?*" So I did, and that's when I wrote *Terraplane.*

EYE: ***Your fifth novel,*** Random Acts of Senseless Violence, ***is the most recent one written, and chronologically the second in the sequence.***

JW: But all of them can be read individually as well.

EYE: ***Years ago, when you were working on*** Ambient, ***you had the basic format of this book set out. How closely did the book follow this plan? Did you envision it from the beginning as the diary of a twelve-year-old girl?***

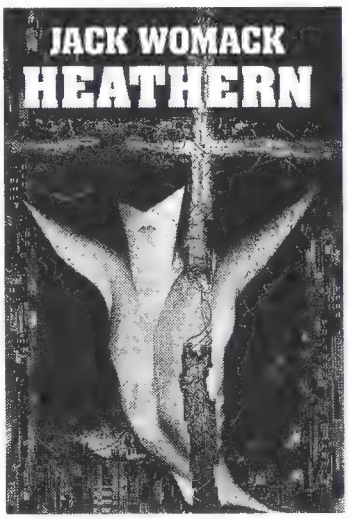
JW: Originally I thought of it as covering this period in a collection of stories, and I didn't know what the stories were going to be. By the time I finished *Terraplane,* and was getting a sharper idea what all the rest were specifically going to be like, at that point I realized that *Random Acts* is the one that's going to be closest to today. It takes place, conceivably, right after the 1996 elections. That is to say, right now.

With all of these books I used a different narrator from a different social group. *Ambient's* got the white man, who's essentially middle class. *Terraplane,* a black man, upper middle class level with army background. *Heathern,* white woman, upper middle class. *Elvissey,* black woman, mid-

dle class though brought into upper to a degree, and constantly fearful of dropping. All of them are fearful of dropping into the sublevel. In *Random Acts,* I thought it would be good to have a small girl from a recognizably privileged background. She goes to one of the best private girl's schools in town. When the novel starts she lives over at Park & 86th, which is about as good as you get in New York. Family reasonably successful, though they know the financial support can always drop away from them, as it does. Then there is the sudden slide which, there being no safety net at that point, is an untrammeled descent. So in *Random Acts* you get an innocent's viewpoint, someone who hasn't yet been exposed . . .

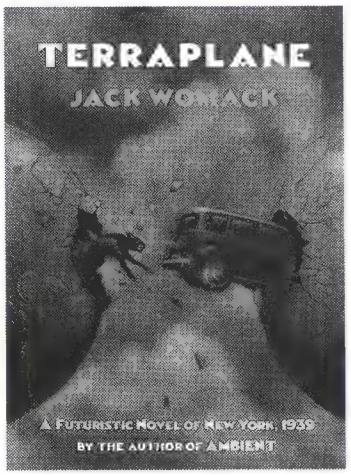
When I first sold *Ambient* to Weidenfeld, the editors came in and they said, well this is great. Now how far from now is this taking place? Is this about 50 to 100 years? I said about 25 and they said no way. It can't be taking place that soon. Let's say 50 years. Actually no, I said, it's taking place roughly 25 years from now tops. And they never got it. Their question was, well how did we become them? I said, we're *already* them. They didn't like that at all. But that's one of the things I wanted to get across in these books. Since I wrote them out of chronological order, I wanted to have *Random Acts* be the closest to the present day. As I've been moving more towards writing in the contemporary vein, I wanted something that could be read either way. Something that fit within the series, but also could be read as a contemporary narrative, or near enough to give you the willies and make you think about what was going on, right now.

By having a young girl as narrator, I could not only do a coming-of-age story, in the traditional sense, but also the coming of age of the people in all of my books. How did the little kids of today become my characters? It also allowed me to be able to start off something in very basic child's english, an intelligent child's english, but a child's english and then show how as the society changes, so too does the language change, so that by the end of *Random Acts* you're essentially in *Ambient*speak, which is what Lola's last diary entry is in. You can go from there directly to the first part of *Ambient* and not lose a beat. I've already had some people, who hadn't been able to get through my previous books because of the language barrier, tell me that because they've read *Random Acts,* they can now read the others. I was hoping that might prove to be the case, and it seems to have worked out that way.



EYE: Random Acts *struck me as a bolero. It starts off on a very mild level and the intensity gathers. You suddenly realize it's hit a certain level of intensity and you don't know where it began. You stop and think to yourself, this is not a calm book any more.*

JW: That's where the diary form helped. You could have progressive entries and a very slow accretion, even though it takes place in only a few months. Some people have wondered about the fast pace of change, but things change in a very short time. It's like the language in all of my books: do I think the language will be that different in twenty years? No, but I think that's the direction with the language. I think that with language you can be more predictive than if you go the atomic helicopter route. You can predict that there's going to be a lot more usage of nouns as verbs and vice versa thirty years from now, as opposed to saying, once we have fusion lawnmowers then the world of the future is here.



EYE: *Linguistic precision is a characteristic of your writing. Most of the time this works very well for me. It creates a very vivid scene. Is working with dialogue and characters more difficult for you? Than, say, straight descriptive passages?*

JW: No, both are equally hard, the way I tend to go about it. With *Ambient,* I separate the groups of people by their dialects. Each group has its particular jargon. You have the Ambients speaking the Ambient-speak, you have the business people speaking their Biz-speak, you have the various other branches that start out—you have O'Malley speaking at times fairly straightforward English but always with that overlay of the Biz-speak influence along with a certain degree of Ambient-speak. O'Malley is the figure around which the languages coalesce.

EYE: ***Your first five novels could be said to be a cycle of books that presents the history of Dryco, the all-pervasive corporation. Dryco is a predominant motif, sometimes foreground, sometimes background, but the spirit of Dryco is everywhere.***

JW: The spirit of Dryco is everywhere. Dryco I use as an extended metaphor for the corporate and business world. But on a different level, Dryco is the world over which its participants have no real control, even those who own it. After so long a time Dryco itself runs the Drydens as much as it runs O'Malley, or Luther, or Jake or any of the other characters. And so Dryco is distinctly an evil entity, but sometimes of an unconscious evility.

In *Elvissey* for example, Dryco is undergoing what in the book is described as "re-gooding", which is to say they're making a deliberate effort to make the company more humane. At the same time the company at this point has become the world itself, basicly. Their efforts, needless to say, in trying to make good something which is essentially bad come to naught, and they're not conscious of it. The ones who suffer are aware, certainly, but Dryco itself isn't.

JW: *Idoru* and *Virtual Light* seemingly take place in a very near-future world. What are the challenges you face when writing about the world as it might be, ten years from now, as opposed to writing about the world as it might be in the middle of the next century?

WG: I think my secret here is that, in terms of science fiction's Strict Rules of Golf, the world of *Virtual Light* and *Idoru* is more like "alternate reality". I'm not so much trying to create an imaginary future and then proudly demonstrate that, by golly, we *could* get there from here. More that I'm trying to create something that feels the way the present feels, *but even more so* (and most particularly in ways that I feel we generally aren't willing to admit to).

But I do find that this near-future scenario, to the extent that it pretends to be one, is both challenging in terms of the tighter palette of possibilities, and more personally satisfying in that it allows me to write more directly from what I've experienced. The Tokyo of *Idoru,* however much it owes to Karl Taro Greenfeld's marvelous *Speed Tribes,* is *my* experience of Tokyo. Quite a lot of details are literally autobiographical.

I think this is a fairly common pattern you'll find in most any bureaucratic or national or religious structure, that the original goals are lost within the structure that grows up around it. Say you have a messianic figure coming forward. His or her actual message is usually lost, or overlooked in the structure that is accreted around it, so that what the messiah sets out to accomplish usually brings about an entirely different result.

EYE: ***In*** **Heathern** ***you've introduced another messianic figure, Lester McCaffrey, who is swept up into the Dryco machinations as Dryco tends to use him for their own crass purposes. Would you say that one of your major themes is the contemplation of a messiah figure enmeshed in the complexities of modern life?***

JW: Well, a messiah is really an easy answer. One of the basic themes of *Heathern* is the necessity for finding the redemptive qualities that a messiah is, traditionally, wont to bring, within yourself. That's the only way that you can then live, I think, within such a structure as Dryco, which is essentially alien to a person's basic feelings. This is why Dryco in the larger sense is the world. How does one get by in the world? It's the redemptive factor you search for.

EYE: ***Lester did not seem to have been corrupted that much by his exposure to Dryco, so he seems to be appropriate for a messiah: he's totally***

centered and has a deep conviction that what he's doing and saying is right.

JW: But the thing you also have to remember is that Lester is a messianic figure. He's not The Messiah.

EYE: *Well, he's "a" messiah, not "The" Messiah.*

JW: Wellll . . .

EYE: *There's a difference, a big difference.*

JW: But I'm saying he's not actually the one you should be paying attention to. He's the one *Joanna* needs to be paying attention to, but for entirely different reasons than the Drydens believe.

EYE: *Do you think that if there was a real Lester McCaffrey that he ought to be paid attention to?*

JW: Not necessarily. It would just *depend.* The question is how would an actual messiah be met, and greeted. If a messianic figure was to appear, would the message even be heard? Or would it automatically be filtered and transformed by the listeners to fit their own purposes? In other words, the actual words of messianic figures in the past, have they come down even *remotely* connected with what was said at the time? Or have they been so transferred by the later palimpsest of opinion that they've become an entirely different thing? And to what degree had these original messages been twisted around to serve the purposes of later generations or even those at the time? Think of Jesus, and what happened after St. Paul finished working him over.

EYE: *How does the messianic character in* Elvissey *differ from Lester McCaffrey?*

JW: The alternate Elvis is a figure that is not a messiah himself, and knows it, but is believed by Dryco to have the potential of being *seen* as a ready-made messiah. You're not dealing with the problem of even changing around the original message because the message is *there,* so it's just a question of having the figure fit the message that's presented and the difficulty that the figure has in adapting to the message and whether they could or not.

EYE: *I have found an interesting quote in* Heathern *that I would like to read back to you: "My generation's zeitgeist preferred to haunt its halls alone, without undue consideration of an unlikely heaven. Therefore, like all, I saw but didn't see, cared yet didn't care, couldn't stop long enough to think about what I might do if I tried, convinced myself that there was nothing I could do, and so did nothing."*

JW: I think that's an essential dilemma of today. On the one hand the pace of life has increased to such a degree that one finds oneself just getting by day to day, doing the work and losing track of larger things. Certainly this is the case living here in New York. By the end of the day you look back and

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JW: While watching the closing ceremonies in Hong Kong I had a sudden awareness that I was seeing a rehearsal of the upcoming millennial party-down. I found it rather sad and unsettling, yet oddly comforting in the sense of oh-well-at-least-that's-over-with. What did you think? Have you spotted any other ongoing rehearsals for the End of the World As We Know It?

WG: Yes, I thought that was quite a neat capsule of pre-millennial angst. I could have been there, actually; *Wired* wanted to send me over with John Perry Barlow to "cover" it, whatever that would've meant. I declined, intuiting that the event itself would be stodgy and vaguely depressing, which it certainly looked to be.

I thought of you when I heard that Mike Tyson had bitten off Evander Holyfield's ears. Which is how, delightfully, it was first described to me. The reality having been somewhat less dramatic, but still it seemed like a background scenario from a Womack novel. Except that in a Womack novel Tyson might've held Holyfield down and sort of gnawed and slurped his ears off, eaten them publicly, one after the other, while the crowd *chanted* something . . .

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you think, "Well what have I gotten done today?" For me the answer is whatever I've written.

I believe that individuals are confronted both with the sense of things passing by with too great a speed to see, and at the same time the feeling of anomie that one gets in terms of isolation from other people—and what *do* you put your faith in? Isn't there anything worthy of belief? It's that leap of faith which so many people are afraid to take, and I don't mean this in any specific religious context here, but just the terms of committing yourself to something larger than yourself and your day-to-day activities. You find yourself frozen in this stasis where you're existing, yeah, but you're not living.

JW: I suspect that more than once you've counted your blessings that you have not only the talent but the *ability* to write, and considered what your life would have been like had you never written a word. What might your own alternate history have been?

WG: The Garden of Forking Paths is a spooky place for me, career-wise.

I've never worked in a used book store, but the smell of one, particularly if there's a bit of stale cat-piss too, induces a major case of the there-but-for-fortune's in me. I find myself glancing nervously into the back room, afraid of catching a glimpse of some stooped, ash-flecked doppelgänger dyspeptically sipping flat beer from a chipped coffee mug.

I was certainly well-prepared to be that guy, and actually somewhat resigned to it. Nearing thirty, I was really quite marginalized: an immigrant, ostensibly trained to do something I knew I'd never do (teach English), no job record to speak of, the platforms of more than one obsoleted bohemia sinking beneath me like the treads of an escalator . . .

Other times, though, I have mildly creepy intimations that I might have not done all that badly in advertising.

I think this is an alienation that's been existent throughout the twentieth century, starting from the time of the Romantics in the previous century. You feel not really part of society, and society its own existence, and you're sort of buffeted about by it, within its wind. How does one make a place for oneself within that, without corrupting one's life? By corruption I mean ignoring, not necessarily what one feels is best, but what one believes or what one wants to do or what one would be happier doing. Do you accept a life of sadness over a life of happiness, simply because in some ways it might be easier? And how do you respond to that? How do you react? And how do you interact with other people? Because if you feel this sense of alienation from your society, then you gradually develop the notion that you *are* separated from individuals as well and therefore you have the concomitant problem of forming any sort of relationship because you don't have the time to look at things in the long term and think, "Can I see myself knowing these people? Being with this person? Doing this ten years from now?"

It's hard to imagine what going to be like even by next month. This *can* work out to one's benefit, in that the future is always an open book in which anything can occur. Do you try to take an open situation and make it work for you, or do you just let yourself be carried off in the river until you reach the final whirlpool?

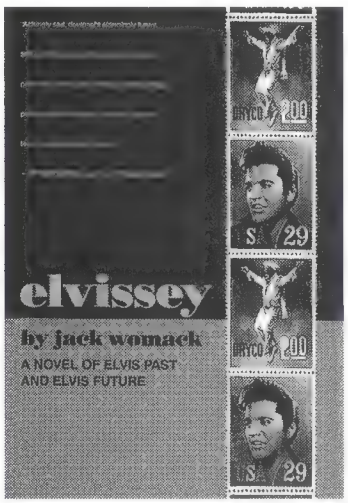
EYE: ***This is an attitude different characters in your books respond to, to a greater or lesser degree. I think that the*** counter ***to that attitude is Lester McCaffrey. When we first meet him in the book, he has devoted his life to improving the quality of life that goes on at the bottom rung of the echelon. Then when he is swept up into the circles of the Dryco high command, he seems to respond with what at first glance is a wide-eyed naïveté.***

JW: At first glance.

EYE: ***I thought that this character, by contrast points out the kind of emptiness and shallow ways of dealing with life that Dryco and their employees, i.e. today's society, is doing lately. This is a very powerful thing for Lester's comments and observations, which are frequently belittled by the other characters, but seem to always cut to the core of what's going on. Only he and the reader seem to be aware of this.***

JW: Lester *knows* what his purpose in life is, and he has accepted that, and therefore he is working within its boundaries to fulfill what he knows he needs to do. If you *know* you can write, you go ahead and write. If you *know* you can paint a house better than anyone else, you go ahead and paint a house. It's just a question of finding your great talent, and doing it the best you can. By accepting a certain purpose, it may seem that in a way you're giving yourself up to the flow but in a different way entirely than just letting yourself float along.

Joanna is floating because she does not know what she is supposed to be doing. Lester is here because he's here to *tell* her what's she's doing. He's here to teach her what she's supposed to be doing. She has learned that by the end of the book, and she's able to go ahead with her life. I don't think everybody got that, judging from some of the reviews.



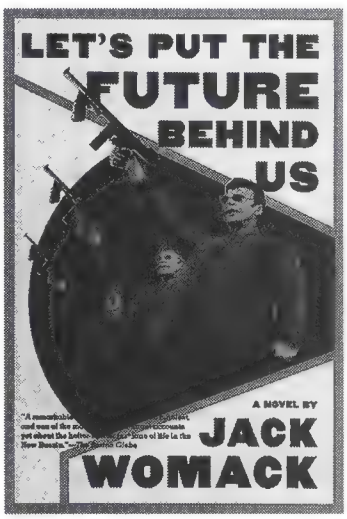
EYE: *Joanna definitely comes out of that book as a very strong character. Do you find it more difficult to create a believable woman than a man?*

JW: No. The narrator of *Elvissey* is a woman. The narrator of *Random Acts* is a twelve year old girl. I had no real difficulty with any of them. Joanna internalizes much of her existence and turns the violence that my male characters express back in on herself. I think this is often the case with men and women. The man will tend to let it out while the woman will internalize it. The main way I distinguished that—or one of the ways that I tried—was scenes of violence in *Heathern* that are seen peripherally. Joanna's averting her eyes the moment they happen.

This is the problem that all my characters have. How do they deal with the violence around them and the violence within themselves? In *Elvissey* Iz's husband John is a guard at Dryco. Under one of the principles of "re-gooding", the guards aren't allowed to kill people any more, so they're being both re-trained and given drugs. Formerly they were always able to express their violent urges. Now these urges are being internalized, and what this is doing is causing them all to commit suicide. This is the problem my characters are facing in this sort of society. Why should they even be living? They have various responses to this.

I'm presently working on the sixth and final volume. Grove is reissuing the first four and by the time the sixth appears in 1998, all will finally be available to be read at one time. I don't yet have the title for the final book. I feel much more assured now, working with contemporary material in a variety of voices, than I did when I first started the series, and felt most comfortable by taking what was going on and moving it ahead by twenty years. So there after I'll be sticking to books set in contemporary times, or at most two years in the future.

EYE: *Your contemporary Russian novel,* Let's Put the Future behind Us, *was originally titled* Picnic in a Graveyard, *was it not?*



JW: Right. "Let's Put the Future Behind Us" was the name of one of the subsections in the initial version. Morgan, my editor at Grove/Atlantic, preferred that greatly over my title.

It's set in contemporary Russia, in Moscow. The first-person narrator, Max Borodin, is a Muscovite businessman who was formerly in the Party. The novel is about his involvement in the new businesses he and his brother have been working with. His brother is attempting to set up a Russian theme park called Sovietland, where you can go and relive those glorious Marxist/Leninist days, to re-experience the joys if you never knew them. He thinks it's an automatic Western tourist grab.

Max owns a small bank and one major operation, the Universal Manufacturing Company. That name is an homage to Charles Fort. It's the name of the company for which the characters work in his novel *The Outcast Manufacturers.* It strikes me as the sort of general name that Russian businesses tend to give their companies. I've seen Russian business cards which list "General Business" as the field the person is in. What the Universal Manufacturing Company does is provide false documents for any purpose to anyone. Their experts are mostly hired ex-KGB people. One of them is working on papers regarding Kim Philby, another is working on something involving Lee Harvey Oswald. They ask no questions, they just provide documents of any sort and they say, "Well, we can prove pretty much anything you want to have proven—we're happy to provide."

The husband of Max's mistress needs to have new documents made, and some older documents changed, in regards to a business deal that he's setting up. What happens is the narrator gets more and more lured into this ongoing business deal, which he doesn't want to be done, not because it's shady but because it's dangerous. At the same time, he's having his own troubles between his wife and his mistress. As the book's set in contemporary Russia, it's probably much more science fictional than any of my previous books.

JW: **What prompts the need for creation, beyond the desire to tell someone else a good story?**

WG: The desire to return again to that from whence stories come, whatever that might be.

The miracle of "becoming a writer", for me, was the discovery, after countless false starts and dead ends, of . . . the source. Which remains the profoundest of mysteries to me: I have no idea what it is or more than the vaguest idea of how I might find it on a given day, or indeed if I will, or ever will again. It's like finding a magic place in a dark wood in childhood, and then wanting to find it again, but there's no map. There never is.

I believe that there are two kinds of writers of fiction: those who've taken whatever steps were required to find that source, and those who haven't. But I also hold that those who haven't are for the most part blameless, because somehow they've never intimated that there might even be such a thing.

EYE: *As readers of the EYE know well, you spent some time in Russia, or in Moscow at least.*

JW: I spent a week in Moscow in March 1992 working on a film treatment—never produced—that I was working on with Gibson and our Kazakh director friend, and I was there again and in St. Petersburg in June 1996 covering the Russian election for *Spin* magazine.

EYE: *Your first visit inspired the milieu of* Let's Put the Future Behind Us. *What did you find that was significantly different about the country, four years later?*

JW: There were any number of surface changes that made Moscow, at least, seem as if it were an entirely different city in many ways. In 1992 I felt I'd stepped into the parallel world, but last summer I thought for the first time that I was already in the 21st century—it's about what you'd expect, or what I've expected. They're building a three-level underground shopping mall just outside the walls of the Kremlin, and half the cars on the streets are BMWs or Mercedes, and so on and so forth, but for most Russians things are plainly just getting worse and worse. Once I turned off one of the main streets downtown into what appeared at first to be a cul-de-sac but then I saw it continued through to the next street through a dark, broad archway. I found myself walking between lines of middle-aged and elderly women, each one of whom was holding something to sell—socks, bottles of beer, puppies. Tragic is too understated a word for the condition in which most Russians presently live, I'm afraid, and for most of them it's just getting worse and worse.

For those who thrive in the criminal milieu of course—which is to say the state and economic system as it exists today—things are perfectly fine. Last summer the latest fad among Moscow gangsters seemed to be

fine suits in colors sold nowhere in the west—bright yellow, purple, turquoise. Very Dick Tracy. It was a weird feeling, as if I were actually in one of my books. What was ultimately most unnerving was that I felt as if I fit in about as well as I was always afraid I would. I don't know if I'll ever go back.

EYE: *Do you have an interest in pursuing film work?*

JW: I wouldn't want to try and adapt my own work. *Random Acts* is optioned at present by Nick Weschler, and Bruce Willis had *Ambient* optioned for three years. After *12 Monkeys* he let the option drop.

EYE: *I've always thought that would be an exceedingly frustrating kind of business for a writer because of the collaborative nature, as you watch your initial vision become diluted and dispersed, though compensated for by mountains of cash.*

JW: When you approach film, you have to look upon it as just collaboration, "All right, I'll do my part, and conceivably something good will come out of it, and conceivably not, and we'll just leave it at that." It's writing but it's a different sort of writing—at least different from the kind I do. There's no *real* interaction, which is why I wouldn't want to do the screenplays of my own books. If someone were to buy them, and then completely change the plot around I would look upon it as the nature of the beast. I would have no hopes of seeing anything of mine ever transformed directly onto the screen.

EYE: *It's like the famous comment of James Cain's. When a reporter who disliked the first movie version of* The Postman Always Rings Twice *interviewed Cain, he complained, "Mr. Cain, they've destroyed your book with this movie." "On the contrary," said Cain, pointing to a shelf, "there it is."*

JW: Exactly. It's a different thing entirely. If you start looking at one as being dependent on the other, that's where you get into trouble.

EYE: *Have you given any thought to what you might want to do when that final Dryco novel is completed? Don't you feel endangered, trapped in the idiom you've created, tempted to return?*

JW: No, because I'm going to bring this to a close with the sixth one to such a degree that neither I nor anyone else will be able to pick up on it. I don't like to offer jobs to sharecroppers, as it were, and that includes myself.

EYE: *I would hope that you would tend to find more interest in what could be termed "an alternate past", as in* Terraplane. *One of the enjoyments of reading* Terraplane *for me was the sense of vertigo, as one saw history diverge from what we know of history and the hints of just how different things were beginning to be.*

JW: Yeah, I like the concept of alternative pasts. But I think there's a limiting factor in that. That's the problem, I think, with historical fiction. You

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JW: You've said that you originated the concept of, God help us, cyberspace as a *metaphor* but it wound up being taken literally. A number of your readers who work in the computer field have been inspired to try to bring about such an existence, imagining it to be a good thing. What are your thoughts on this?

WG: Whereas previously I've been inclined to shake my head and murmur something about boys being boys, I'm starting to feel that I do have a certain responsibility, here, that needs owning up to. What I did for these particular "boys" was to *fetishize* computers. A book like *Neuromancer* is sex, drugs, rock'n'roll, and computers, and the computers are the active ingredient. And a lot of the tools I used to do that were quite similar to the tools a copywriter uses; I made it sexy.

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know you've got a ready-made setting as it were—and certainly with traditional historical fiction you've got even ready-made characters—and that's why I think most historical fiction just often doesn't come off. There's usually some slip-up or something, somewhere, that throws you off, which is what makes writing in an alternative past *easier* to a degree. But at the same time, does it make it *too* easy? You can go back fifty years and change something around, but does it come out to anything more than that? Do you really develop anything new with characters per se? With "possibles", and historical settings, do you really get any insight into why the historical process developed as it did? Or are you essentially just playing around? The opportunities for playing around and leaving it at that are fairly great. While the concept is intriguing, it's not something that I want to concentrate on beyond the series.

That's always been something that I think has been overlooked in time travel stories, both in film and fiction. The concept of the person going back in time to try to change history. That's pointless, really, that's just chronological masturbation. If you were to go back in the past, to Victorian times, or to the time of the enlightenment or something, the world would just be so utterly alien to you that you might as well *be* on Mars. You'd be assaulted with sensations that would not necessarily be pleasant. It would be the same for anyone from the past coming into today. There would just be no real realm for communication. That's why in *Terraplane* and *Elvissey* the people have an inordinately hard time really understanding, not so much what they're saying, but how they're *thinking*, Wanda in *Terraplane* cannot get a handle on where Luther is coming from. How they can be so normal-seeming and at the same time so murderous. They're working from two different sorts of brains, here, and one cannot grasp the other. It would be like having a philosopher talking in great detail about a particular aspect with a physicist. You might have moments where you hit upon a parallel line of thought but the modes of thinking that each would be working from would just be working at cross purposes three quarters of the time. The general thought would get lost somewhere in there.

JW: Youthful protagonists and narrators often turn up in Southern fiction. *Idoru's* Chia Pet is, I think, the most memorable and fully-realized of all your own younger characters. It strikes me that encounters between adults and children to be the ultimate alien encounters. How does that strike you?

WG: Chia came entirely out of left field, as characters sometimes do, and really saved the book, for me. Earlier versions had been sunk hip-deep in Laney's guilt over the death of Alison Shires (for whom I retain a sharp pang of unrequited authorial love, as she was originally supposed to have much more of an onstage role).

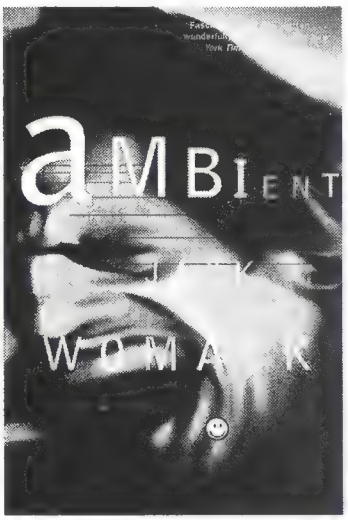
I agree with you: *children are the aliens we most know,* since to some extent we can almost remember having been them.

But the fact of our mutual Southernness (Kentucky and Virginia respectively), as evident as it is to us, is something I suspect most of our readers would scarcely think of. Two guys who write about slightly-more-apocalyptic versions of the world today, sure—but *Southern?* Myself, I didn't fully identify with the Southern literary tradition until I discovered Cormac McCarthy, about five years ago. They'd been telling me for years that I really *should* get off on Faulkner, but somehow I never could. Still don't, actually. Then I read the first two pages of McCarthy's *Suttee* and it was like discovering an entirely new *language,* like reading Ballard or Joyce for the very first time, and it was so precisely the language of my birth, yet magnificently transmuted somehow. That was probably my biggest literary epiphany of the past decade or so. And that's why Rydell, in *Virtual Light,* comes from Knoxville.

EYE: *Your work seems to me to have a quintessentially American feel to it. It's like various aspects—mostly bad but some good—of American culture blown up and writ large. I'm aware that you did a tour in the U.K. Are you received in the U.K. differently than here?*

JW: It's hard to say because up until recently I got more attention in the U.K. than I did here. Then for a while I didn't, and now I think I do again—*Let's Put the Future* went back to press before publication over there, and certainly that's never happened over here with anything I've done. I think that they see the American aspects to a greater degree in England, coming from an outside point of view. At the same time I think they appreciate the precision in the language that you were talking about earlier, which just sort of comes naturally to me but doesn't always with American writers.

In terms of whatever you call the "American elements" in my books, there's a certain *exaggeration* there which I think is fairly essential to the American character which I use, not only for my serious effects but also for comedic effects—which seems to translate sometimes and sometimes not, in England. I've had a number of people in America tell me that I sound more like a British science fiction writer than an American.



EYE: *Your language doesn't* sound *American. The sheer precision that you use is something that you don't normally find in a lot of American fiction where there's a sort of blue collar snobbery about using barely grammatical English. But the situations and the characters ...*

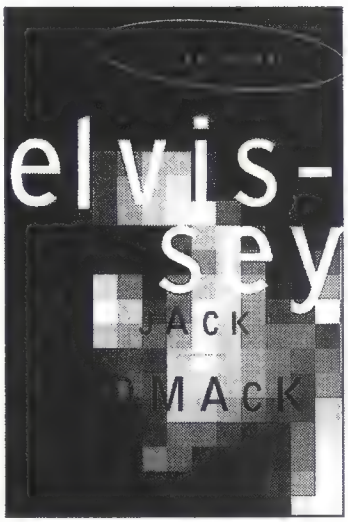
JW: Oh, the situations and the characters are definitely American. They're American through and through. They're wild and they're dangerous and they're out of control. They have enormous feelings that they have no idea how to express, or if they try to express them they do it badly. So, yes, they're about as American as they get.

EYE: *By now your books have been translated into several languages. Have you had any feedback from other countries? Have you had any problems working with translators on your inimitable language?*

JW: I worked directly with the translator of the Italian edition of *Random Acts,* and my old friend Karl Bruckmaier is translating the same book for Heynes at present, but otherwise I've worked with no one else. I just get the books in and have no way of telling how good the translation is. I can't help thinking it must provide an amazing challenge. When I've met European fans, they generally tell me they've read them in English. A lot of Europeans tend to do this, simply because they're more familiar with foreign languages, including English, than we are.

EYE: *How about Japan?*

JW: Hayakawa bought *Heathern* and *Terraplane,* but the bubble burst and they haven't bought anything else since. My translator was Hisashi Kuroma, who died. *Elvissey* and *Random Acts* and *Let's Put the Future* are being read over there, and have been for years. I don't know who's translating any of Gibson's books, or Sterling's or any of the others Kuroma used to do. So conceivably that's the slow-up.



EYE: *Do you have any interest in writing a book-length non-fiction piece?*

JW: It would depend on the subject. It would have to be something appealing to my, shall we say *specialized* interests. I've done some journalism for *Spin* magazine, but that's really been it so far. It's like with a short story, I have to find exactly the right subject. Whereas with a novel, you have to have the right thing, but it can be a broader sort of thing. You can start with a situation like, "I want to do something with contemporary Russia", and then figure it down from there, as opposed to "I need to have a short story that is going to do this within this many pages".

EYE: *As with any working writer your influences and obsessions come from all directions, of all different kinds. What kind of music do you listen to these days?*

JW: Lately I've been listening to Nick Cave and Sinatra. I kind of swing back and forth. I was very very happy when punk music came along, for exam-

ple, and Patti Smith was a definite influence on my writing style. Robert Johnson I like very much. I enjoy some of Elvis's earliest music, but most I don't very much like.

EYE: *You mean the first Elvis.*

JW: The very first, yes, yes, the "actual Elvis" before he was transmuted into what he became afterward, before he got a drummer, in a sense, and certainly before his mother died.

A number of films have had influences on me in some way, both the visual aspects of my work and the dialogue. A lot of my dialogue comes out in a very odd way from thirties screwball comedies, in terms of the pace, and the number of people talking across purposes for ofttimes deliberate and ofttimes unintentional comedic effect. Specific favorites of mine include *King Kong, Citizen Kane, Freaks,* a number of films. But anything I encounter has an influence on me that gets filtered through my perspective.

When I go back and try to say, "Well where precisely did this come from?" I'll usually find that there have been several influences working simultaneously, so, for better or worse, it's translated into something different. I take basic material and just re-interpret my own new world around it. In that sense I suppose I'm as much of a crank as the rest, so there's a certain kinship. But in a much more subtle way.

JW: Close your eyes and remember a scene from the World Before Television; your world. What do you see?

WG: I am with my mother in a plowed field of very dry earth, overlooking the curve of a country road. The sun is hot and bright and there is no breeze. It is Tennessee, somewhere near Oak Ridge, and it is 1948 or 1949. My mother is wearing a cotton house dress sewn from flowered fabric used to make the sacks that flour comes in. The miller's trademark and other labels are printed on the flowered material in a blurry red ink that washes out easily, an inducement for country wives to buy this kind of flour. Two sacks make a pillowcase, four a dress. My mother is smoking non-filtered Camels. I am pulling up buried runners and plucking the peanuts from them; the shells are pallid, having never seen the sun, and feel both very dry and just slightly damp. A truck passes on the road and it is black and it is shaped like no truck whatever in the world today. One day soon, in that past, this landscape may vanish forever, flooded by the Tennessee Valley Authority in sacrifice to rural electrification. And there is no artificial sound anywhere but the receding sound of the black truck, which I can no longer see.

EYE: *Most writers have an odd relationship with their critics, both the positive and the negative ones. How do you feel you have been assessed in the press?*

JW: I prefer not to read my reviews, either good or bad. I usually find that even the good reviews often—not always—miss the point. What I'm doing has been so wildly misinterpreted by some of the critics that I really have nothing to *say.* I think with my sort of stuff you either get it or you don't, and if you don't, fine. I often think this is probably a fairly common experience for a writer. You wonder which book was actually read by the critic.

EYE: *Well how about your readers? Do you get fan mail?*

JW: During the first seven years of my working career I've received one letter. Here it is in its entirety:

"Dear sir, I am the most avid reader, 'rading' at least one book per week. The *New York Times* Book Section is practically my Bible. From it somehow I read about your book *Ambient.* I went to my local library and filled out a request card. The book was duly sent to me. After about ten pages I put it down and have no intention of ever finishing it. It is just about the most horrible trash and the style defies imagination. No wonder you've found a publisher whom nobody ever heard of. I am also certain that this will be 'our' one and only book ever. Yours truly . . ." ◘

Jack Womack and the Horned Heart of Neuropa

by William Gibson

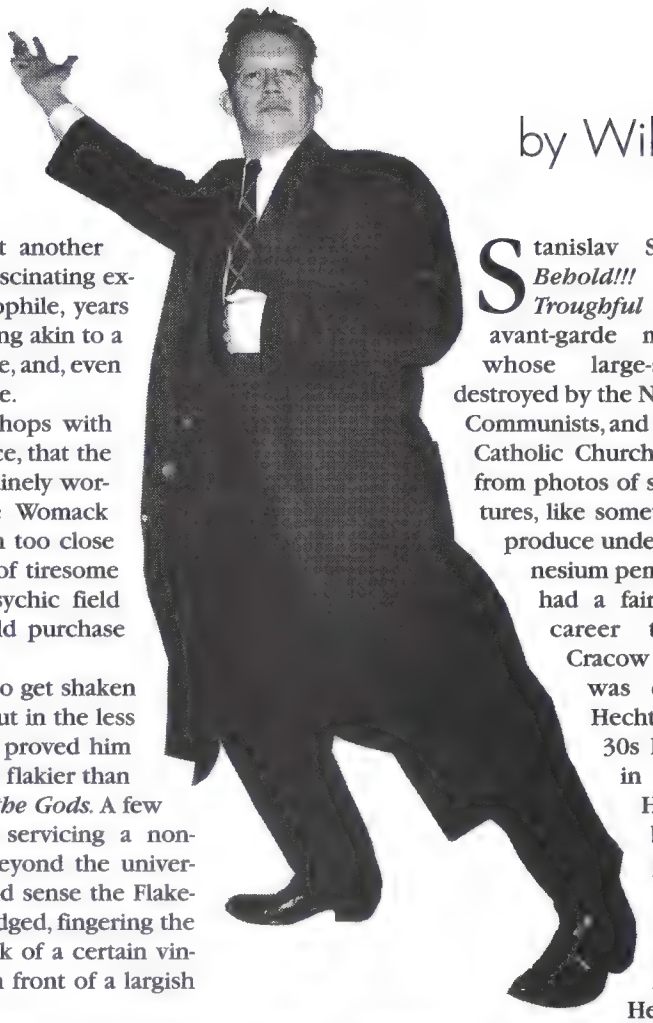


PHOTO BY ERNESTO MORA

Watching Womack zero in on yet another primo example of Crank Lit is a fascinating experience. Like any specialist bibliophile, years of patient pursuit have produced something akin to a sixth sense. He knows the stuff is out there, and, even in a strange town, he knows, sort of, where.

Touring the local second-hand bookshops with him on a recent visit, I learned, for instance, that the good stuff, the true quill, those texts genuinely worthy of a place on the shelves of the Womack Collection, were not likely to be found in too close proximity to a major university. Citadels of tiresome rationality, large universities radiate a psychic field intolerant of the sort of mind that would purchase (and then re-sell) *Behold!!! The Protong.*

Minds of this sort, he explained, tend to get shaken down into the urban core, or deposited out in the less fashionable suburbs. And our experience proved him right, as the stores near UBC held nothing flakier than multiple yellowing copies of *Chariots of the Gods.* A few miles away, though, at an intersection servicing a non-descript residential neighborhood just beyond the university's psychic reach, he brightened. I could sense the Flake-O-Meter starting to tick. "Promising," he judged, fingering the shattered spine of a Jack Vance paperback of a certain vintage, as we stood before the dollar tray in front of a largish second-hand establishment.

I related how the proprietor of this particular shop had once shamelessly stolen several books from a carton a friend of mine had brought in to sell, shifting them into his own stock while he pretended to evaluate the lot. "That *is* promising," Jack said, somewhat obscurely, and scooted in.

When I found him, toward the rear, surrounded by what looked to be a trove of extremely odd and various volumes, I felt a thrill of pride. Vancouver could provide weirdness with the best. But Jack, carefully scanning the shelves, looked unexcited.

"How about this?" I asked, pulling down an odd-looking volume indeed.

"Oh," Jack said, "that's just one of those Britons-are-the-lost-tribes-of-Israel things . . ."

But now his eyes lit with the unmistakable thrill of discovery.

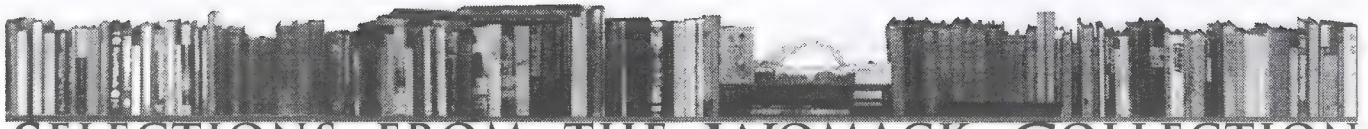
He reverently took down a badly self-published effort on Ogo-pogo, British Columbia's resident lake-monster, an unintentionally comic portrait of the crypto-critter gracing its spartan cardboard cover.

"Very good," he said, *"very* good . . ."

It was on the list.

Stanislav Szukalski, author of *Behold!!! The Protong* and *Troughful of Pearls,* was a Polish avant-garde monumental sculptor whose large-scale works were destroyed by the Nazis, confiscated by the Communists, and roundly disliked by the Catholic Church. They looked, judging from photos of surviving bronze miniatures, like something H.R. Giger might produce under the influence of magnesium pemoline. Born in 1893, he had a fairly extraordinary early career that bounced from Cracow to Chicago (where he was championed by Ben Hecht) and back. In the early 30s he founded something in Poland called the Horned Heart Tribe and began to produce "explanatory" texts (as well as thousands of drawings) on the order of *Behold!!! The Protong.* The Horned Heart Tribe advocated the radical reformation of Europe (leaving out the "inferior" countries of Germany, France, Great Britain and Italy) as Neuropa, and proposed a teaching institution "devoted to the artistic education of sturdy boys with noble faces". Horned Heart Tribe members (circa 1936) habitually wore a black, t-shirt-like jersey over white shirt and dark tie. Emblazoned with the Horned Heart. Some of the Horned Heart Tribe died fighting the Nazis; others, the Communists. They didn't much like anybody else; nobody, apparently, liked them. They are about as forgotten a group as it's possible to be. They published a magazine called *Krak.*

I mention this because I happen to have stumbled on it ("Echo of a Parallel Century: The Paradox of Szukalski", Eva Kirsch, *Juxtapoz,* Spring '97) and because *Behold!!! The Protong* is on the shelves (entirely justifiably) of Jack Womack's library of (way) alternative worldviews. And also because I always wonder, looking at Jack's library, about the human stories behind these books. Somewhere out there, the children of the author of the breast-reading book go about their business. "Dad had a thing about, well, tits; he had this file-cabinet full of pictures . . ." ◘



Selections from the Womack Collection

Frog Raising for Fun and Profit
American Frog Canning Company
First sentence: "A frog is not a fish."

Reflections on the Manson Trial: Journal of a Pseudo-Juror
Rosemary Baer
Juror's wife stays home, pens opinions, composes haiku, tests recipes.

Biblical Dinosaurs
Ronal J. Baker
Proves the Ten Lost Tribes of Israel were dinosaurs.

I Gotta Be Me
Tammy Faye Bakker
Autobiographical. Still looking for her diet and exercise book.

The Bane in Kennedy's Existence
Bernard M. Bane
JFK is alive and well and bothering Bernie a lot.

The Erotic Art of the Enema
David Barton-Jay
Guests chez *Womack invariably zero in on this one. Light water damage.*

BISBA: The Burr Identification System of Breast Analysis
Timothy Burr
Author explains how to tell a woman's personality by her breasts.

Pitfalls of Surgery
Harold Burrow
Second edition. Original title: Mistakes and Accidents of Surgery

The New Guide of the Conversation in Portuguese and English
Pedro Carolino
Phrase book. "Dialogue 20. For To Visit A Sick."

The Backside of Satan
Morris Cerullo
Some authors are more adept at titles than others.

Rubber Bizarre Life
Jack "Macintosh" Cloutier
Author's constant need for rubber rapture exacerbates his dyslexia.

Bottoms Up with a Rear Admiral
E. Aubrey Cox
Memoirs of North Carolina proctologist; Jesse Helms's, one hopes.

Criswell Predicts to the Year 2000
Criswell
"Once I was Baby Criswell! And even then, I was interested in the future!"

Joyce McKinney and the Manacled Mormon
Daily Mirror
"How she tried—and failed—to win an Osmond!"
British good taste at its best.

I Was a Negro Playboy Bunny
Anna English
With enticing photos of Ms. English in bikini, vacuuming furniture.

The Rather Narrative: Is Dan Rather the JFK Conspiracy's San Andreas Fault?
Monte Evans
We're way *through the looking-glass here, people.*

If We Can Keep a Severed Head Alive . . .
Chet Fleming
We can, of course, but we shouldn't.

Sudden Death and How To Avoid It
J.C. Furnas
The Ur-Vaughan recounts, in Ballardian detail, auto crash horrors.

Hell is My Husband
Beverly Gaines
The horrors of life living with a monster who never rewraps the cream cheese recounted.

Daddy was an Undertaker
McDill Gassman
Illustrations live up to the title.

The Evidence for Phantom Hitchhikers
Michael Goss
Wouldn't think it'd be as definitive as it is, would you?

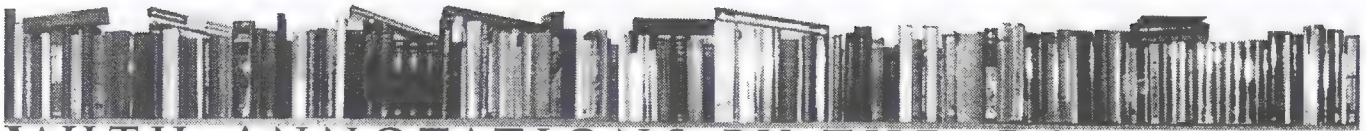
Cape to Cape by Wheelchair
Ernest Gutman
The next best thing to Across the Andes by Frog.

Autoerotic Fatalities
Hazelwood, Dietz, Burgess, et al.
Great beach reading. Really breaks the ice at parties.

Jack Ruby's Girls
Diana Hunter
His fave stripper recalls zany days at the Carousel Club, pre-Oswald.

Tomorrow's Masters Series: Keane
Walter & Margaret Keane
Tipped-in plates of tarsier-sired children, and the Jerry Lewis family.

The Face of the Man From Saturn
Harry Stephen Keeler
Famously awful mystery writer and inventor of the webwork plotting system, i.e., the cut-up method sans *drugs.*



WITH ANNOTATIONS BY THE COLLECTOR

The Human Gyroscope
Arabella Kenealy
After two readings I remain uncertain what, if anything, it's about.

Lawsonomy
Alfred Lawson
The essentials of Suction, Pressure, and the Zig-Zag-and-Swirl Theory.

They Lived on Human Flesh
Enrique Lopez
You probably read Alive. *This is the other book.*

Mars as the Abode of Life
Percival Lowell
Finely-detailed maps of non-existent canals, nodes, right-turn lanes, etc.

Space Aliens from the Pentagon
William Lyne
Makes the X-Files *seem like* December Bride.

Hold Hands and Die!
John Maguire
A Jonestown quickie, as non-exploitative as you'd expect.

The Wild, Wild World of Jayne Mansfield
Jayne Mansfield
"How did all this splendor envelope *[sic]* a simple brownette *[sic]* figure model from Austin, Texas and a husky building contractor from Budapest?"

Was Jonestown a CIA Medical Experiment?
Michael Meiers
You have to ask?

From Outer Space to You
Howard Menger
My favorite contactee; my favorite chapter: "Barber to the Space People."

Madagascar: Land of the Man-Eating Tree
Chase Osborne
Carnivorous plant otherwise seen only in Jungle Jim movies here discussed.

Adolf Hitler: The Unknown Artist
Billy Price
Rich Texas fanboy's catalog of his collection. Most pieces done by same forger who did the Hitler diaries.

Casket & Sunnyside
Seabury Quinn (editor)
My favorite trade journal. I have a number of copies from the 1920s, with ads evocative of the period.

NASA Mooned America!
René
Yes, we didn't go to the moon. Bound in electrical tape.

Phone Calls from the Dead
D. Scott Rogo
Scientifically proven. No word yet on Email from the Dead.

Earth Not a Globe
Samuel Rowbotham
Flat earth. Hollow and stationary earth books are in a different section.

Life as I Have Known it Has Been Finger-Lickin' Good
Col. Harlan Sanders
Kentucky chicken hustler has nothing to complain about, but he does.

The Elvis Image
Janis Schranz-Cabaj
Crazed author criss-crosses South, stalking Elvis impersonators.

Hallucinogenic Plants
Richard Schultes
A Golden Guide, à la *Dr. Zim. From the Just Say Whoa-Ho! era.*

The Pleasures of the Torture Chamber
John Swain
Laugh-a-minute account of racks, iron maidens, scolds' bridles, etc.

Behold!!! The Protong
Stanislav Szukalski
The Greatest American Crank explains why Communists are descendants of yetis.

Entertaining with Insects
Ronald Taylor
Texture, not taste, is what counts in this cuisine.

Canine Sexualis
W.W. Waine
Heavy petting indeed, with charts illustrating suitability of breeds.

The Badge
Jack Webb
A full and unbiased history of the LAPD told entirely in Dragnet-ese.

The Drag Trade
Edward D. Wood, Jr.
The cleansing fire of the Master's solaronite-like writhing illuminates the shadowy netherworld of she-males; plus Ed doubles as the book's cover girl.

Drowning the Kittens, or, The Repo Man Cometh

Reading Jack Womack

by Richard Calder

If, as the cliché allows, science fiction uses the future to interpret the present, then Jack Womack's "Dryco" sequence of novels—*Heathern, Random Acts of Senseless Violence, Ambient, Terraplane* and *Elvissey*—apart from offering us the usual satisfactions to be found in a well-made universe made out of words, puts us in touch with a contemporary U.S. psychoscape, that is, a climate of interiority that represents an end-of-millennium frontier where quotidian concerns are segregated from the pathological only by the most rickety of fences; a frontier that is a gun-smoking, black-joking wild westworld all leanness, meanness and roiling insanity. A frontier of the dispossessed and the mad.

The quotidian side of the homesteader's fence? Downsizing—by which is meant CEOs ordering layoffs to see their own pay inflated by the rising value of their stock options—is creating a maelstrom of paranoia, a vertiginous sensation of living on the edge, wholesale redundancies threatening to pitch the American middle classes into the abyss. (Amongst the euphemisms for "to fire" [to destaff, to surplus, to initiate imbalance correction] my favourite is that attributed to Canadian newspaper tycoon Conrad Black: "to drown the kittens".) And the other side of the fence? The side where the frontier rolls into dark, unknown, hostile territory, the wild West that is the abyss itself? Womack's central theme is not, despite superficial appearances, violence, or even the effects of violence: it is the madness discovered in the descent into the maelstrom, the fall from prosperity/normalcy into poverty/anarchy and the bloody lunacy involved in survival. The frontier town of the mind—Womack has called it New York City—which is delineated in terms wherein naturalism and surrealism (or, say, the facts of social upheaval and its correlative manic, hypnagogic state of unease) intermesh, is a town haunted by an American nightmare: evil cattle barons, savage natives, mercenary gunslingers and sometimes, just sometimes, palliating the night terror, a guy or a gal who somehow manages to trade in their black hat for, if not a white one, then one off-white, grey. It is a town astride a borderland of the rational and irrational. It is the future. It is bad.

With loss of job (and concomitant loss of security, health insurance, self-respect, all the things that constitute a sense of belonging, of home) a whole existence changes. The street opens its jaws, devours those unable to adapt. Those who survive do so at the cost of their humanity. Those who survive and prosper—the central protagonists of Womack's universe—are distinguishable from the mad denizens of the street only by their suits and limousines, designer survivalists in a neo-Social Darwinist jungle; a hypercapitalist-libertarian grand guignol; Dallas with chainsaws. These cowboy aristocrats of the purulent swarm, along with their courtiers—executives and gofers red in tooth and claw—are anti-heroes invested with enormous energies: men and women who have kept their head above the slime and ooze of NYC in a Faustian pact with the fat cats who drown their own litter. They become, in a sense, part of a psychic conglomerate, one of the many faces of Hydra-headed New York—the city being the central character, the real narrator of all five books—part of an inferno of rape, murder and near-ubiquitous affectlessness; part of a larger globalized sociopathic malaise. And they become one with the city's bughouse ecstasy, riding its surf of cruel delirium. Violence becomes the expression of this absurd:

> An old Pontiac scraped along the street, hauling produce from the Javits Centre. The car was tyreless; the women pulling had a rough time of it. Nearby, two rascals wedged a boy into a crack between two buildings and took turns playing Johnny-in-the-pony. At the corner of Grand, a woman straddled a man lying in the walk, caressing him repeatedly with a hammer; her point seemed moot. I paused to give ear to two accordionists plying Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and gave them each a nickel. One put the change into a plastic capsule and swallowed it, so that it might be recovered safely, once home. I always went through Chinatown, walking from the Tombs; when stalking time settled, it was the safest route.
>
> —AMBIENT

Random Acts of Senseless Violence—though second in the series—is the novel a reader new to Womack's work should read first. (It is surely one of his best books.) The narrator is a twelve-year-old girl—Womack has a remarkable ear for the speech rhythms of adolescence—and chronicles the breakdown of a middle-class New York family's life, their fall into the abyss: a series of domestic disasters mirroring the riots and civil unrest spreading remorselessly across the U.S. The evolving language of the diary—from structured, preppy English to a wild explosion of street and corporate slang underpins that antinomy in Womack's oeuvre: the descent into barbarity is often accompanied by an ascent into a manic high of idiolect, a night language that ultimately justifies a character's motivations and actions by sheer exuberance. As the real theme in *A Clockwork Orange* (the blurb on Womack's novels often makes reference to that text) is not social conditioning (despite Anthony Burgess's many attempts to vindicate the savagery of *Orange* in that manner) but its joyful, suave and self-redemptive language of euphoric violence. Womack's chief concern is not satire, extrapolation, social criticism, but the way in which the demonic and irrational can be bodied forth in an idiom sufficiently intense to hold the "sane" world of corporate manoeuvre typified by Dryco accountable for its meagreness, its spiritual, intellectual and emotional poverty. This is not to indicate a moral compass to Womack's books; it is to indicate a cardinal vein of their rigourousness. The writerly qualities of the "Dryco" sequence arraign the sequence's

naturalistic setting; and they are the qualities by which the books themselves must be judged.

The novels *Heathern* to *Elvissey* detail and explore the world of the multinational as a metaphor for life in a postnihilistic inner landscape of insecurity and callousness, of random and senseless dislocation and terror. Despite the originality of Womack's stylistics, this is no idioverse; this is a transpersonal interiority (according to statistics issued at the end of 1995, NYC's crime figures are the lowest for 20 years, but its mythic status in our collective unconscious remains intact): a mental nightland of contemporary fears and neuroses, an imaginative truth. Against this universe—paralleling it—is set a universe of delight, of verbal lushness: a manic lingo that combines the excesses of Beat Poetry with 21st-century Haigspeak to produce something new and strange, an alternative world—expiatory, neologistic—which represents an attempt to redeem the madness embodied in the "naturalism" of the text, the novels' purported "reality". "The raison d'être for Ambient speech was that only in word and not in image could true beauty be found . . ."

Is the word successful? Yes; though that affirmative needs to be qualified.

First, what is this naturalistic "reality"?

The corporate fascism that dominates the near future finds its apotheosis in the multinational Dryco; for its employees and those that depend on its many-headed, many-armed succour, the company is all in all; dismissal means being on the street with the heathen, or heathern, as the southerner Thatcher Dryden—former drug lord and kingpin of Dryco—pronounces it; being amongst those bereft of belief and hope. Lola and Joanna, the narrators of the first two books in the series, are both dispossessed members of the middle class, people who—following a disastrous stock market crash and subsequent revaluation—were made "bankrupt between breakfast and lunch"; they are individuals who have been brutalized by loss and their need for survival, their accommodation with a world random and senseless, a world of baroque savagery. And they are hungry for salvation. Lola becomes at one with the street; Joanna turns to Dryco, the new god of chaos. Controlling the police and the army, Dryco is the U.S. government in all but name. (The company had found out about the revaluation before it went into effect, trading old money in for new bills; when the market crashed they were the only ones able to buy.) After four assassinations of U.S. presidents in one year, the current prez has "appreciated whose butter smeared his bread". At Dryco, murder is not merely a corporate tool; it is a corporate norm. The rest of the world has been infected, too. As the narrator of *Terraplane* says during his sojourn in Moscow: "As in America, one of Russia's myriad charms was that you could be murdered without reason and not even God would notice, or care . . ."

License and repression, in the world of Jack Womack, go hand in hand . . .

Thatcher Dryden, Sr., "The Old Man", lives like a sybaritic emperor of the Last Days of Rome, attended on by nine-year-old concubines in his country estate. (After dinner, there are

PHOTO BY LESLIE HOWLE

turkey shoots in the grounds with Black, Asiatic and Latino children as game.) But he also encapsulates the psychological territory of anti-drug, anti-abortion fanaticism. As Edward Luttwak has put it:

> One doesn't have to be a historian of inter-war Europe to recognize the connection between what the economy is doing to most Americans, and the increasingly intolerant climate of contemporary American life. European visitors nowadays often point out that more and more things are legally or socially prohibited in the Land of the Free. Because the insecure majority does not even realize that the economy, too, can be subject to the will of the majority—it believes in Invisible Hands, in the unchallengeable sovereignty of the market, and in the primacy of economic efficiency over its societal purposes—it is venting its anger and resentment by punishing, restricting and prohibiting all that can be punished, restricted and prohibited. America's own product-improved fascism is not especially racist, let alone war-like, but it does contain the essence of the original item . . .
>
> —LONDON REVIEW OF BOOKS, 2 November, 1995

Children are suspect. In *Random Acts of Senseless Violence* there are Kure-A-Kid rehab groups: sort of summer concentration camps for wayward kids—not real delinquents, but

middle-class kids caught committing peccadilloes, sexual or drug-related; the camps specialize in emotional/intellectual cretinization. License and repression: Business conferences at Dryco are versions of Rollerball; and employees are locked at their terminals by stocks, with those blinded by overwork given Braille keyboards (at cost). Christianity, exposed by the "Q documents"—that is, the original gospels—as being founded on lies, has been superseded by the C of E, a cult based upon the deification of Elvis Presley. (In *Terraplane* we encounter a parallel universe in which Elvis is a psychopath and there has been a black American holocaust. *Elvissey* corresponds with *Heathern* in that it concerns the search for a saviour, and for the same reason, that "His new overseers would re-engrave the image stolen into desired shape, pleasing his followers in whatever way they wished; but pleasing Dryco, first of all.") In Long Island, a local insurrection has turned into a prolonged guerrilla war and Dryco are importing illegal immigrants into the territory to make the conflict a perpetual war, thus keeping the army engaged in NYC and protecting the Drydens and the seat of their empire. And then there are the "Ambients" (original mutants spawned by the Long Island "accident") and their wannabes (voluntary, self-mutilated volunteers) who embody in their invented cant—"a little Spanglish, some obsolete English; whatever slang they liked or developed on their own"—the attempt to achieve escape velocity from the novels' representative hell. Theirs is a license unwedded to repression; a linguistic freedom that points a way to release. Redemption is personal, each person their own messiah.

Womack's naturalism often falters in its details. The distinctions, for instance, that he makes between what is legal and what is illegal become meaningless in such a grotesque world. (People still worry about their taxes; despite the all-pervasive violence, guns are outlawed.) And both good and evil, drawn as they often are as absolutes, are unconvincing, their embodiments being either well-meaning cranks or melodrama villains. The motivations of his characters are those of Third World despots and the ignorant serfs of their benighted, if exotic countries: clichés, in other words: the broad brush strokes of parachute journalists. But as I have indicated, this sequence of novels has to be ultimately judged by its expressionistic language, the extent, not to which that language builds a convincing naturalistic world, but to which it transforms a psychoscape of nightmarish insecurity and unpredictable ferociousness into an aesthetic terrain of joy and celebration.

Problem: is the language's vivre of the order, say, of that writer he has been compared to, Anthony Burgess? Does Womack's language really fly? Burgess's nadsat is truly wonderful; Womack's ambient-speak resembles bad Beat Poetry; his corporate-speak—"the jargon in which all paperwork, for obfuscatorial reasons, was written"—often comes over like a good-to-middling joke extended over two hundred pages. It is not in Womack's invented language that his strength lies, but in the cool, detached manner with which his first-person narrators describe the world around them with psychopathic black humour and crazed insight. It is in his poetic descriptions of violence (Peckinpah's romanticism sans misogyny; scenes that might be described, perhaps, as Jim Thompsonesque; though, where Thompson is genuinely psychotic, Womack is ironic) that Womack's prose takes off:

> He'd readied, standing atop crates new-piled below the window. Through the drapes he thrust his saw, doubling its length as he activated it, raising it between the brownhaired one's legs. Sounds of shredded cloth mixed with harsher grind as a puff of bone dust rose; as he lifted his tool higher, working it through, all that lay in the man's lower half dropped further south, squishing floorways as if to the offal drain. Without sound or comprehension he pitched forward, his split complete. Oktobriana, meantime, advantaged with sharpened reflex; grasping Nate's gun barrel, pushing it beneath his drop-mouthed chin, she crushed his hand round the trigger. He flew back as he fired, his skulltop sending his shotaway cap into the air. Jake bounded inside as Wanda, cognizant again, began crawling towards the living room, offbalancing Edgar, who froze where he stood; I dived after her. Hefting his saw Jake heaved it towards Edgar, catching him fullface, pinning him to the kitchen's lacquered-wood cabinet like a museum butterfly . . . —TERRAPLANE

NYC is a city of affectless androids; they learn to feel through language; language is the spectrum of their affect. As people change—and change is relative here, for these are people with emotions buried deep, too deep for tears—so does the language of the text. In the concluding paragraphs of *Elvissey,* the female narrator—pregnant, and just witnessing her husband's suicide—chooses life over death in an expression of lyricism which asserts her damaged humanity:

> As his distanced words guided me, so I raised it, grazing the razor against my wrist, relishing its butterfly feel, shivering at its well-rinsed warmth. If husbands and wives become as one blood over time, had not too much of mine already spilled? What was remaining, after all? In the midst of my debate I glanced through the wide window, and I glimpsed a spark above the trees: distinguished a flare, a flicker, an earthbound plummet, the skyward sign. Turning the razor so that the blade's dull edge pressed against my palm, I slid it back into its holster, and dropped it floorways, alongside John.
>
> I reclined, so that warm water would engulf me; felt its wetness rinse my scalp, the drift of my weightless arms: fancied myself Ophelia, loosed from *Hamlet,* my mind repossessed, unwilling to linger overlong in the stream. There could be but one messiah, and that was the one whose two expressions I housed; no others need apply. Alone, that was how to slide into winter; alone and free, if not forever rid of the stranger in my head, free at least to show my child to all who chose to see.
>
> So regooded, I renewed, and rose like Venus from the waves. —ELVISSEY

Elvissey, the last book in the sequence (so far, at least; we have been promised a final, sixth volume) is, in many ways, a more studied, more organized, better plotted novel than its predecessors. It takes in about every theme raised in the sequence; but what it achieves in organization, it loses in raw energy. Perhaps this is inevitable. From the descent into the maelstrom of insanity and self-destruction that characterizes

the earlier novels in the "Dryco" sequence, an emergence into a new way of perceiving "reality" has asserted itself, and reality has—through language—been transformed, redeemed. Womack has charted a national paranoia (there are even flying saucers—classic McCarthyite symbol from a previous paranoia—in his alternate USA within an alternate USA). It is a paranoia associated with the pace of change, of hurtling into an unknown, insecure future. The sequence's somewhat stagy postnihilistic underpinnings—a false gravitas that struggles to assert the maxim that "nothing is true, everything is permitted"—are, in the end, revealed as constituting something of a pose. Womack is a Romantic. In the end, life is asserted, not the abyss. What will follow—in both terms of style and substance—remains to be seen. However, while we wait we may turn from the world of Dryco to modern-day, post-Soviet Russia. For it is here that Womack's latest novel has its setting.

Henry Kissinger has written that Russia's economy is "a weird hybrid of black markets, reckless activity and a state capitalism in which big industrial combines are run by erstwhile Communist managers in the guise of privatisation". In Womack's sixth novel, ***Let's Put the Future Behind Us***—a black comedy set in contemporary Moscow—Womack concentrates very much on that weird, the chill atmospherics of a city in which free market forces operate beyond the constraints of a civil society. Womack first focused on a capitalist Russia in ***Terraplane;*** he now returns to his theme with gusto and aplomb.

The New Russians that populate the pages of this book are bizarre indeed—and wonderfully funny. Whereas the New York City of the "Dryco" novels was a grotesque playground of paranoid fantasy, it is to be suspected that the Moscow of Womack's nouveau frisson is not too removed from the truth. (Womack seems to have become an authority of sorts on post-Soviet Russia. He has written some journalistic pieces for ***Spin*** magazine and, well, yes, SF EYE.) One gets the impression, after reading through the demented episodes of ***Let's Put The Future Behind Us*** that Womack has found the perfect living metaphor for the mental landscape that haunts him, a transmutative city that, in many ways, is a doppelgänger of New York, a sort of America through the looking glass. Indeed, in the novel's afterword he asserts, "When I first saw Moscow in March 1992, I knew I was finally seeing the world as it is and the world as I perceive it in congruence." What America and Russia have most in common, it is suggested, is the kind of gangsterism and semi-organized anarchy—a black libertarianism—that results from a free market with its finger on the trigger. Max Borodin, the novel's narrator, leafing through the ***Moscow News,*** broods over the "spectacular accomplishments of the world's most progressive society":

> The Brain Institute denied that it held Anastasia's. A parliamentarian was gunned down in the Metro by persons unknown, and the city militia assured the public they would track down the assassin as if he were a filthy rat. Ufa's citizens were sickened by mysterious fumes; the populace suspected the Army of burning chemical weapons nearby, though the Army denied responsibility. Throughout the near abroad, in Chechnya, in Tadzhikistan, in Nagorno-Karabakh, parched hates continued to be quenched with new blood. If I wished to have pizzas delivered to my office, Pizza Hut would now charge me only forty hard dollars . . .

Max Borodin runs the Universal Manufacturing Company which "supplies a demanding public with needed documents", creating forgeries to satisfy every purpose. ("We can prove John Kennedy shot himself," Max notes, "as long as we are paid in advance.") About him all is in such a state of high craziness that he reflects that the necessary transitional stage between communism and capitalism remains that of alcoholism. How long has Russia heard lies about its radiant future? Max is determined to make the most of the present—even though life is often as surly and belligerent as the "nonobtrusive service" to be found in restaurants, hotels and the petty enclaves of officialdom—and to put the future on the back burner. The novel's plotline—involving mafiosi muscling in on Max's business, Max's problems with wife and mistress and his problems in extricating his younger brother from preposterous business ventures—provides a thread running through a labyrinth of darkly comic interludes, a series of markers by way of which we encounter, in the shadowy nooks and alcoves of Moscow's life at kooky street-level and in killer-kitschy dacha, the Dickensian-like characters who are the narrative's chief joy; characters like the Vladimir Zhirinovsky caricature, Pavel Petrenko, leader of the People's Party of Hammer and Steel. Max muses about the possibility of Petrenko's party winning Russia's highest office:

> It intended in wasting no time writing its party platform into law. Included in the platform were such surprising proposals as issuing every Russian family a weekly case of vodka; building stainless steel walls around the entire country and a clear plastic dome above it, thus securing our nation against Western sneak attacks; recapturing for Russia places we have never possessed—Norway, Tibet, Arizona—and supplying secret technology for the "psionic x-ray bomb" to the Bosnian Serbs. The PPH & S also proposed to expand offensive weapons production, break existing treaties, imprison foreigners, and ethnically cleanse our traditionally problematic minorities, but so did the majority of parties.

I don't wish to disclose too much of this novel's plot. That it contains many twists, turns, to conclude with a shootout worthy of Quentin Tarantino, is to indicate that this book by no means loses in raw verve by being, in many ways, Womack's most intricate and sophisticated offering to date. In ***Let's Put The Future Behind Us*** Womack's mastery of the grotesque is as sure as ever, but, in comparison with the "Dryco" books, there is less straining for effect; Womack's Moscow, as bizarre as it is, is totally convincing; its realization completely assured. In the New Russia Womack seems to have discovered the perfect naturalistic setting for the surreal and paranoid visions of human depravity, violence and derangement which pervade all his work. Jack Womack has come home. ◘

Albert Camus, Truman Capote, Lewis and Jonathan
Raymond Carver, Raymond Chandler, Arthur C. Clarke
Crowley, Paul Davies, Philip K. Dick, Charles
James Dickey, Emily Dickinson, Annie Dillard,
Dozois, Thomas M. Disch, Clyde Edgerton, Suzette
Elgin, Harlan Ellison, T.S. Eliot, Ralph Ellison, Shusaku
William Faulkner, Lawrence Ferlinghetti (I know,
John Fowles, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Mary Gaitskill
Gilchrist, the Brothers Grimm. And: Joe Haldeman
Heming-way, Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, Franz
Yasunari Kawabata, Milan Kundera, Hans Kung
Lafferty, D.H. Lawrence, Richard E. Leakey, Ursula
Guin, Stanislaw Lem, C.S. Lewis, Mark Leyner, Jack
Barry Holstun Lopez, Arthur Lyons, Peter Matthiessen
Somerset Maugham, Robert R. McCammon, Cormac
McCarthy, Jack McDevitt, Maureen F. McHugh, Larry
McMurtry, Thomas Merton, Arthur Miller, Yukio Mishima
James Morrow, Alice Munro, V.S. Naipaul, Flannery
O'Connor, George Orwell, John Kennedy O'Toole, M. Scott
Peck, St.-John Perse, Robert M. Pirsig, Edgar Allan Poe
Frederik Pohl, Reynolds Price, Thomas Pynchon, Joanna
Russ, Geoff Ryman, Oliver Sacks, J.D. Salinger, William
Saroyan, Rod Serling, Shakespeare, Mary Shelley, Lewis
Shiner, Charlie Smith, Solzhenitsyn, Steinbeck, Sterling
Wallace Stevens, Theodore Sturgeon, Swift, William Tenn
PE
ABD

Nine Prescriptions For My Funeral

by Michael Bishop

illustrated by Diego M. Rios

i.

I will croak of nosebleed: a hemorrhage of such sterling moment that to stanch it will require a modest facsimile of steelydan and more than a crimson teaspoon of bravado and fortitude. Its spreading mortal stain will obviate the need for any additional treatments of JustForMen™, a postdeath haircare product for grizzled male human carcasses of a certain demoralizing nudity. The spirit flies chilling, but the flesh must speak:

ii.

The grave, opined the sophist Marvell, is a private place. Marvell never understood that the simple contiguousness of so many sepulchral excavations overcrowds the subterranean plane on which our mortal coils unwind. A pneumatic female shedding her raiment on another heliorevolutionary rockin eve in the TimesTheyAreAChangin Square (until herself as stitchless if not yet so umbilically disadvantaged as the Eve who first reversed the ecdysial process) would have more privacy. So bury me not on the lone prairie, at woundedknee, in forestlawn, in memorial acres, in a marble cenotaph, at ocean or sea, or in a nefarious plot. Yeah, bury me not.

iii.

Do not bury me. Burn me. Fire sufficed for heretics, mahatmas, unsuspecting patrons of the copacabana. I like it less than I do a massage, but the rub is that in my rubbedout state preferences of the tactile variety no longer apply, except maybe as rubbings. Transport me to a place of burning, strip me of every stitch but my AtlasOfAnatomy ("THE Anatomy Dude!") teeshirt, and yield me not to the trochar that I may selferect at least once even in the lustextinguishing midst of my immolation. This guy, they will say, loved what the body could do and regretted what, in its subsuperhumanness, it couldn't quite. Its incapacities included flight, nonstop copulation, survivable collisions with bridge abutments and locomotives, spitting AK-47 rounds, polevaulting the parthenon, and others Too Numerous To Mention. Q.E.D., the flames, which in quotes he always relished.

iv.

The cremation must occur, perforce, in a crematory. (If I were to be schematized, it could take place in a schematory and my heirs could eventually plot me, but that isn't what I want: see prescription no. ii.) The *ceremony,* however, may occur in almost any venue: church, meatpacking plant, Kmart parkinglot, picnic pavilion, SuperValu frozenfood aisle, prefabricated metal junk building, the SF & Mystery Bookshop, wherever. But these obsequies, I hereby stipulate, must occur in the twostory Victorian house in which my wife's mother survived her girlhood and the incessant japery of three itinerant riots in the guise of older brothers, and on our ambient grounds. Wait for good weather. Allow folks to roam in and out as if the house had no walls. This freedom will enact parabolically the unfettered peripatetism of the released human spirit. (Or discourage both naps and stationary sulks.)

v.

The celebrants arrive limboing, on pogosticks, or in giddy rugby scrums. They include family, local friends, and people from so far away that they have crossed timezones, oceans, and selfacknowledged lines of ethical conduct to pay their respects and eat our food. Phil Gramm, Cindy Crawford, William Shatner, and Marilyn vos Savant are not among them. Billy Graham, Cindy Ziesing, Barbara Strickland, David Hartwell, Karen Joy Fowler, Joan D. Vinge, Suzette Haden Elgin, and Marilyn Massa, however, arrive in costume with their mates, their pals, their animals, and/or their favorite partymix recipes. Homemade bottled beer nestles in strategically disposed coolers of pink ice alongside lots of peeled boiled shrimp. John A. Beyers in denim cutoffs, worn huaraches, and a teeshirt bearing the slogan FAITH HOPE & LOVE ABIDE does not preside, but organizes threelegged

races and teaches a crew of hyperactive urchins "The Addams Family" theme. Noel Burt, Joe Buffington, Ken Godfrey, Steve Moore, Wayne Hollaway, and Pat York preside, but loosely, over a period of six or seven hours, as the spirit-seized lurch forward to testify or read. (Please, no mimes.)

vi.

Music? Both the profane and the sacred: "Light My Fire" and "Amazing Grace"; "Mr. Tambourine Man" and "You Gotta Serve Somebody"; "Fragile" and "Softly and Tenderly"; Miles and Mozart; "Smackwater Jack" and "Fairest Lord Jesus"; "Help" and "Come, Thou Fount of Many Blessings"; "Papa's Got a Brand-New Bag" and "This Is My Father's World"; "California Dreaming" and *"Dona Nobis Pacem";* Morrison yelping and Manzarek skating the Hammond will elevate organs everywhere. Only those with frogs in their larynxes and/or love in their craws may sing. Spontaneous exhibitionism while ranting these songs (*not* the deliberate sort) earns doorprize points, said prizes to stream from Jeri's bemused cogitations on how best to disburse titles from our multistory firstfloor library and my peculiar CD eclection. Eeee*Yooowwww!* (One polka is negotiable, but only one.)

vii.

During this protracted affair, Rob See gently proselytizes Steven Utley, who looks around politely for a wall with which to intermolecularize. John Willis equips George Zebrowski with a pair of waterskis, like the railroad tracks between here and Durand. (If you wipe out, Z Man, cautions John, don't hang on; if you hang on, close your mouth—West Point Lake's polluted.) Jimmy Mitcham bestows on John Kessel a coupon for a tour of the Little White House. John wipes his forehead with a cloth, *not* a paper, napkin. Robert Frye recites from memory a half dozen Wesleyan hymns for F. Brett Cox, who reciprocates with a raveup of "The Waiting Is the Hardest Part", *a cappella.* Jim Gray sets out a Venezuelan hammock for David Zindell between two plum trees. (Unfortunately, one of these trees is in a suburb of Caracas.) In seasick repose, David contemplates a requiem not only for me but for the entire credulous population of Pine Mountain. Robert Williams and Grant Carrington debate the cons and pros of protracted bachelorhood; Robert mentions Thucydides and Gibbon and Tuchmann, Grant sucks at the blueberry stains on his mustache. Landis, Rusch, Soukup, Shunn, and Turzillo sound a clarion call. Paul Culp, at Annie Marie's keyboard, essays the dominant Manzarekian run from "Light My Fire". Benford, Bear, and Frost scat-chant a Gregorian something. Jerry Page knits a pile of balloons. Carter Scholz and Ian Watson send telegrams. Imitating the deceased, Robert Frazier misplaces a poem. Karen Joy finds it. As Bob declaims, Rick Wilber slam-dunks an elegy. Like Jesus, Klon Newel weeps; like David, Owl Goingback dances. Jack Dann smiles Lisatifically and Jack McDevitt charitably. Ellen Datlow videotapes, and Jim Turner edits, the event. Howard Morhaim, Jennifer Hershey, Jeri, Jamie, and Stephanie lift a memorial toast.*

viii.

At random intervals readings occur. The excerpts come from Corinthinians, Galatians, John's Gospel, and Psalms. Also from James Agee, Brian W. Aldiss, Sherman Alexie, Dorothy Allison, Isaac Asimov, James Baldwin, J.G. Ballard, Donald Barthelme, James Blish, David Bottoms, Ray Bradbury, Anthony Burgess, Robert Olen Butler, A.S. Byatt, Albert Camus, Truman Capote, Lewis and Jonathan Carroll, Raymond Carver, Willa Cather, Raymond Chandler, Arthur C. Clarke, John Crowley, Paul Davies, Philip K. Dick, Charles Dickens, James Dickey, Emily Dickinson, Annie Dillard, Gardner Dozois, Thomas M. Disch, Clyde Edgerton, Suzette Haden Elgin, Harlan Ellison, T.S. Eliot, Ralph Ellison, Shusaku Endo, William Faulkner, Lawrence Ferlinghetti (I know, I know), Karen Joy Fowler, John Fowles, Gabriel García Márquez, Mary Gaitskill, Ellen Gilchrist, the Brothers Grimm. And: Joe Haldeman, Ernest Hemingway, Aldous Huxley, James Joyce, Franz Kafka, Yasunari Kawabata, Milan Kundera, Hans Küng, R.A. Lafferty, D.H. Lawrence, Richard E. Leakey, Ursula K. Le Guin, Stanislaw Lem, C.S. Lewis, Mark Leyner, Jack London, Barry Holstun Lopez, Arthur Lyons, Peter Matthiessen, W. Somerset Maugham, Robert R. McCammon, Cormac McCarthy, Jack McDevitt, Maureen F. McHugh, Larry McMurtry, Thomas Merton, Arthur Miller, Yukio Mishima, Judith Moffett, James Morrow, Alice Munro, V.S. Naipaul, Flannery O'Connor, George Orwell, John Kennedy O'Toole, Paul Park, M. Scott Peck, St.-John Perse, Robert M. Pirsig, Edgar Allan Poe, Frederik Pohl, Reynolds Price, Thomas Pynchon, Joanna Russ, Geoff Ryman, Oliver Sacks, J.D. Salinger, William Saroyan, Rod Serling, Shakespeare, Mary Shelley, Lewis Shiner, Charlie Smith, Solzhenitsyn, Steinbeck, Sterling, Wallace Stevens, Theodore Sturgeon, Swift, William Tenn, Dylan Thomas, Lewis Thomas, Tiptree, Colin Turnbull, Mark Twain, Kurt Vonnegut, Robert Penn Warren, Ian Watson, James Welch, James Wilcox, Kate Wilhelm, Tennessee Williams, Gene Wolfe, Tobias Wolff, W.B. Yeats, Roger Zelazny, and the paradoxically dead Russian immortals. No reading lasts longer than five minutes; some, or course, may overlap.

ix.

Disposition of the cremains: A pinch in the cornbread. A teaspoon or two in the bubbletube of a Wurlitzer. A couple of grams in the windowputty. The kids mix food coloring into an ample measure and paint their faces. See me, taste me, touch me, heal me. My ransom, my friends, goes blowing in the wind. Rollingpin me flat, flat as the Kansas plains or the alkaline Oklahoma panhandle. Sprinkle me around a dogwood, a hydrangea, a redbud tree, a sycamore. Let the cats drop their scats in the quintessential litter of my granulated self. Part of me is bone yet: gnarled, burnt, and rattlesome. Let me rattle some in the dappled Piedmont brightness and then, smiling, let me go. As the Incredible String Band boys would say, themselves but gleeful lifters of the line, Ain't got no home in this world anymore. ◘

* One may assume that I read with pleasure the work of my writer friends; if their names do not appear in prescription *viii,* imagine them there.

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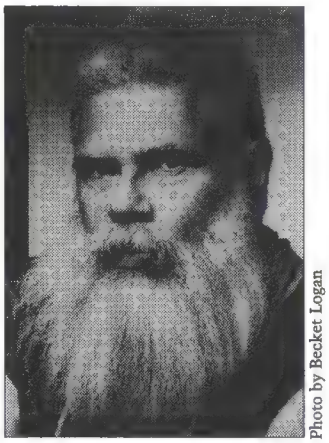

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About writing about the writing of Philip K. Dick's *The Man*

The Anxiety of Influence

by Lucy Sussex

illustrated by Omaha Pérez

in the High Castle and Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night*

Two Nazi salutes:

The first one occurred in Isenheim, Germany, sometime in the late 1930s. My mother, an art fan, but speaking no German, had somehow doggedly travelled across Nazi Germany in order to experience Grünewald's Isenheim altarpiece in its paint and canvas actuality. At her destination she encountered a great work of Christian art, but also an officious stationmaster, greatly concerned that this young Fraulein should catch her train back to France. He bustled around her like a clucky hen, opening the carriage door and helping her in, closing the door, but still keeping watch from the platform. Then, as the train chugged out of the station he gave this young woman, this fair, blue-eyed Australian, the ultimate sign of respect, the Nazi salute. Heil Hitler!

Second salute:

My father was also an Australian in pre-war Europe, but a student at the Sorbonne. He and a group of Anglophone friends were hiking down a French country road, when they found an abandoned teddy bear in their path. Bizarrely, its furry arm was raised high, as if this inoffensive bear was a toy-closet Nazi. The students stood around the bear and saluted back: Heil Teddy! Photographs were taken, preserving a record of my incredibly youthful-looking parent saluting a bear fuhrer.

Brunswick, fifty years later:

March 1994, and neo-Nazis, National Action, as they call themselves, demonstrated outside Brunswick Town Hall, for freedom of speech. I wasn't there, but I saw the photos in the local paper, and thus indirectly witnessed them, as I did the salutation to the abandoned bear. As a result I could identify the young man in black, shaven headed, who wandered down Sydney Road. On his head were tattooed words, rendered illegible by distance both from my trampoint and in the photo. Did they read: Love Adolf? White Power? At least he had the courage of his vile convictions—another National Action member was masked with a scarf, like a western bandit, or, more relevantly, like the shrouded Islamic women living in Brunswick. Thirty members of National Alliance demonstrated, to be met by a counter-demonstration of several thousand infuriated locals. International Socialists mainly, I was told. Another person said: "But the dykes were there too!"

I described these interesting if worrying events in a letter to a friend who lives in the Czech republic, formerly Czechoslovakia, and got this reply:

In our country, there is now much more groups like extremely rightist skinheads (doing massacres of Gypsies) or anarchists (attacking participants of expensive balls and other "high society" activities), or defenders of animal rights (disturbing the horse races)—this all was unthinkable in the totalitarian times! Neo-Nazists are not as strong here as in Germany, because Nazism was condemning also the Czechs as an "inferior race".

It is funny that my older son was picked up to play a Nazist child in an American film Vaterland *(based on an American sci-fi novel, but I haven't read it yet)—he had to sing Horst Wessel Lied in a chorus of children and I got also a costume and played a woman in the audience—the whole scene was set in an alternate world, in 1964, where the Nazists had won the war and now they are celebrating Hitler's 75th birthday. The scene was filmed outside last week and so we spent the whole night in the freezing open air, and my son caught an awful cold, as he wore only a thin uniform, and now he is sick, but happy that he played in a film.*

Vaterland is not the only fiction concerned with the dystopic (as opposed to utopic) possibility of a second world war won by the Axis powers. In response to the letter quoted I sent to Prague a copy of my story "Kay & Phil", about two writers who also considered this appalling possibility, via the medium of the novel. "Kay" is Katharine Burdekin (1896–1963), an English feminist writer who published the prodromic *Swastika Night* with Victor Gollancz in 1937, under the pseudonym "Murray Constantine". She is considerably less known than "Phil", Philip K. Dick (1928–82), canonized within the science fiction field, a "cult" writer outside it. Dick's Nazi dystopia *The Man in the High Castle* was published in 1962 and won a Hugo award in 1963, the year of Burdekin's death.

It is highly unlikely Burdekin saw a copy of Dick's novel. On the other hand, there are small details in *The Man in the High Castle* that indicate he *may* have read her dystopia. However, they were not the stuff of an academic article. The anxiety of Burdekin's possible influence on Dick was something better explored in the medium of fictocriticism, or to create a sub-category here, ficto-biography.

Midnight, 1961,
in Point Reyes, California ...

During the key time of his life when he was writing *The Man in the High Castle,* Philip K. Dick was living in Point Reyes, with his third wife Anne and their children. I recreated his milieu from the two biographies of Dick already published, a piece of research conducted under singular difficulties, as at the crucial time of writing "Kay & Phil", they were unavailable to me except in Bruce Gillespie's living room. Gillespie, editor and publisher of *The Electric Shepherd,* the first volume of Dickian criticism, does not loan books. Therefore the necessary research into "Phil" took place in a room filled with Bruce, books, at least four cats, and a companion brought to chat to Bruce while I frantically took notes.

"Kay" was a little easier. The available information on her is limited to several prefaces and articles written by Professor Daphne Patai, responsible for cracking the pseudonym "Murray Constantine" and reprinting Burdekin via the Feminist Press in New York. Thus, as I somewhat nervously confessed by letter to Patai, I had the freedom to make "Kay" up, as I did not, to the same degree, with "Phil".

* * *

Not a creature was stirring, except in the small cabin, its one lighted window like a wakeful eye. Phil called this place the "hovel", though it was really a haven, the place away from home where he wrote. Tonight, though, he was not seated at the Royal typewriter but lolling in the one armchair, a pile of books at his elbow. He had Goebbels' *Diaries,* Alan Bullock on Hitler, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead,* anthologies of Japanese poetry, and on top, the black-backed twin volumes of the *I Ching.* You do too much research, his wife Anne had said over dinner. Like heck, he had thought. Now he wondered if she was right. Maybe I should just go ahead with the book. We need the money, don't we? All those goddamned bills. ...

Behind him, he heard the sound of a discreet, very low cough. He turned his head to see, standing by the door, what he at first took to be his mother. Dorothy shouldn't be here, he thought—last I heard she was on vacation. And why is she dressed in her nightclothes?

Then he remembered that his mother never wore pajamas, let alone striped flannelette ones such as showed through the slit in the mannish woollen dressing gown, nor plain slippers, without heels. The tall, thin, elderly woman standing in front of the closed door was a stranger.

* * *

The above is a reasonably accurate description of Dick's milieu in 1961, even if Bruce Gillespie felt it wasn't his Phillip K. Dick. As regards Burdekin, the problem was that in 1955 she had nearly died of an aneurysm, which left her bedridden until her death in 1963. Clearly the dramatic possibilities of a meeting between Burdekin and Dick could not be explored in the medium of social realism. Metafiction, maybe, an authors' space, outside the dictates of space and time.

* * *

"There would be differences in how we would envisage such a world," Kay said, swinging one foot. "You are fortunate to be writing well after the defeat of fascism. In 1936 it seemed an all too possible future. Now it is merely an alternative for you to toy with, fictionally."

Phil got to his feet, stung. "Hey!" he said. "I'm not playing with anything. I'm serious!" He gestured wildly, inarticulately, then froze—

because at the tip of his index finger a window had suddenly opened up, as if one of his stepdaughters had snipped an illustration from the *National Geographic,* leaving a neat hole in the glossy paper, so that in flipping through the magazine he had found the page depicting the home of a Pilgrim father cutting to the following photofeature on Tahiti. There, in his cabin, was a large square of bright blue sky, with a vapor trail across it.

"Aargh," he said, and withdrew his hand hurriedly. The window remained, floating in mid-air.

Kay had arisen. "My fault, I'm afraid. Things like this happen when I go abroad. I suppose it's so improbable that a sickly old Englishwoman should wander via the astral plane that attendant improbabilities follow hard upon. . . ."

She shuffled up to the square and gazed into it. "The view from an office," she commented.

Phil neared, and cautiously peeked over her bony shoulder. He saw a room very high up, dominated by a glass wall, showing San Franciscan sky and at the bottom of this vista the Golden Gate bridge. In the foreground was visible one corner of a shiny hardwood desk and by the window hung a scroll, of beautiful paper, with Oriental characters writ large upon it. He smiled in recognition. "That's Tagomi's office."

"Tagomi?"

"He's in the book I'm planning."

She turned her head, and he saw a glint of excitement in those old eyes. "Shall we take a closer look?"

* * *

I read a lot of Philip K. Dick in my twenties; now I return to only a handful of his books, leaving the majority un-revisited. He died in 1982, and was soon the subject of two biographies, revealing the utter strangeness of the man, something not apparent except in his final, inferior fictions, works of raving bugs religious fanaticism. Moreover, though in our post-modern condition we do not expect the creators of fine artwork to be in themselves fine people, he was profoundly flawed, a misogynist fearing the mother figure, attracted continually to young, unthreatening women. What might have he have made of Murray Constantine's *Swastika Night,* a book it was at least possible he could have read, since it was, in its second printing, widely distributed by Gollancz? The book is as much strongly feminist as it is anti-Nazi.

My mother and I swap interesting books, she having participated in my early Philip K. enthusiasm and then subsequently in my discovery of Burdekin, a book she passed on to my father. Both agreed that, though they had grown up with the depression, and the awareness that a second world war was unavoidable, they had no inkling of such matters as the holocaust, which as Patai notes, Burdekin envisaged six years before the event. She was well-informed, being a friend of Frederick Voigt, the *Manchester Guardian's* correspondent in Berlin in the 1920s and 30s. Thus she took particular note of the Nazi's early suppression of the German feminist organizations. Her fictional society shows a future Nazi world, taken to an extreme that is not illogical, for she had correctly divined the misogyny inherent in the ideology.

But to experience her book, though, Phil and Kay again have to enter a fictional world . . .

* * *

Revealed was a swastika candelabra illuminating two human backs, stock-still in front of an elaborate keyboard. A church organ, thought Phil, and seated at it were the organist, a woman with mouse-brown hair and a young girl, with the same drab coloring, a page-turner. Kay took a few steps forward; he followed. Now they were gazing over the musicians' heads, into a vaulted space, very high, but narrow. Though he could barely see the arched roof, against the opposite wall was a kettledrum, and leaning over it, a burly figure, sticks poised to strike. There was a choir too, all in long, flowing robes, like gospel singers, their mouths half open, as if about to sing.

At the center of the building, where its four arms met, stood an aged and dignified man, wearing a black cloak, over a tunic as blue as the San Franciscan sky, with silver swastikas on the collar. Around him were the congregation, who had risen from simple wooden chairs, their mouths also agape.

"Frozen like that, they do look absurd," murmured Kay.

Phil knew ministers, and he did not doubt the calm authority of the man in black and sky-blue. What bothered him, though, was that the swastikas were accompanied by the flowing hair and beard of an old testament prophet. What is the guy, he wondered, a beatnik? The drummer was similarly hirsute, as were the choir and congregation. Bearded like hillbillies, the lot of them. The only exceptions were the children in the congregation, a very pretty blonde girl in the front row of the choir, and the sisters? mother and daughter? at the organ. He looked down at the two mousy heads below him and realized suddenly that he was in error: though the organist had hair as long as Anne's, he also sported a straggly goatee.

Kay goofed, he decided. The Nazis would never let their

hair grow like that—they'd think it effeminate. But he could hear, barely above a whisper, her voice again:

"The old man is the Knight von Hess, the feudal leader of this district. I suspect that he may be rather like your Samurai Tagomi, a noble man in an ignoble system, although he himself would reject any comparison with the Japanese. It was he who compared them to apes."

Phil was looking at the congregation. "Who's the young man in the second row, with the broad, ruddy face, and the protuberant blue eyes?"

Kay turned her head. "Clever you," she said. "That's Hermann, another main character."

"He sticks out because he's gawping at that chick singer. When the service is over, is he gonna ask Goldilocks for a date?"

"Goldilocks is a boy."

"The faggot!"

"They all are."

He stared at her. You may look like a sweet old lady, he thought, but hoo boy! you certainly don't think like one.

"Is that the reason for the long hair?"

"No. Even before the war certain sections of the Nazi party were identifying with pagan mythology. I merely extended the concept to their religion and their personal appearance, having them bearded and tressed like Thor and Wotan. And . . ."

A slightly mischievous expression crept across her face.

"But perhaps I will let you see for yourself. If we could find a secluded nook in this church, somewhere where we could see without being observed ourselves, I might be able to start the action of the novel. I feel a curious desire to hear the choir, vile though their lyrics are. I should know—I wrote them myself."

"Behind the curtain?" said Phil.

"We couldn't see anything there. I wonder about the steps, though. Might they lead to a vantage point?"

Before he could reply she had answered herself. "Of course! How could I forget, not though I made use of it in the book. The Hitler miracle plays!"

"What?"

"They would have been performed in the church, and the scenes where Hitler and Goebbels are addressed by the Divine Thunderer, from Heaven where the heroes live, require gods. Upstairs!"

She darted out of the alcove, nearly smothering him in the voluminous folds of the curtain as she pulled it shut behind her. He extricated himself, and followed Kay up the stairs, until they came to a landing cum props room, with heaped in it horned pâpier-maché helmets, wooden spears, even a breastplate, its gilt beginning to flake and peel. The room was closed on one side by another curtain, blue this time. Kay marched up to the slit in the center of the curtain and drew it aside a smidgen.

"Yes," she said. "I was right!"

Through the lips of dusty blue cloth he could see below the choir, the congregation and the grizzled head of von Hess.

"There's a platform out there," he said.

"Too visible. We will be safer behind the curtain."

She sat down on the cold stone, regaining her breath. Phil did likewise, feeling vulnerable and wishing that they could be closer to their exit.

After a while Kay said:

"You may find this strange, but I am not entirely sure how to get things moving."

"Concentrate," he said. "Or maybe snap your fingers."

He acted out his words, then regretted it, for the sound was fearfully loud in this quiet place. Kay smiled, cautiously lifted her hand, then repeated his motion.

Music. First there was an organ chord, deep and sonorous, then a roll on the drums, as loud as if Kay's Divine Thunderer were within the church. Phil looked down and saw the Knight had turned towards the west of the building, with the congregation following suit. A massed choir of male voices sang out: "Ich glaube!"

"Their Creed!" said Kay, speaking loudly into his ear, for the singing soared towards the gods at awesome volume. They believe, Phil thought, they must really believe, to sing like that. That singer, the blond boy, what a pure soprano! It put him in mind of an angel, a Wagnerian angel. Pity about the tune though. And the arrangement. It sounded like the duller bits of Beethoven and Wagner shook around in a barrel with some Bavarian drinking songs. This is supposed to be 700 years in the future, he thought. Surely German music would have progressed in that time. What about Schoenberg and the other avant-garde composers? Then he recollected that they had mostly been Jewish and the Nazis had abominated their work.

What were they singing about now? He caught the word "exploded" and on cue the organ and the drums cut in again, augmenting the sound to a thunderous roar. The figures below lifted their arms stiffly in the Nazi salute and he felt a pang of distaste.

"What was that crescendo for?" he said into Kay's ear. She turned her head, and her lips almost against his earlobe, said: "Adolf Hitler, their Christ. They were saying he was not born of woman, but exploded from the head of the Thunderer."

It sounded crazy to Phil. He shut up and listened to the rest of the Creed, which contained some familiar names, with Stalin and Lenin execrated, Goebbels and Goering praised, bizarre in that mass-like setting. At the end the Knight turned back towards the east, and the congregation sat, the sound of their chairs on the stone floor jarring and discordant. There was a long silence, then the Knight, after a cough as polite and soft as Kay's, began to intone, in beautiful courtly German. Phil mentally translated the words:

"As a woman is above a worm
So is a man above a woman."

What? he thought. That wasn't in the Nazi ideology. They were keen on Kinder, Küche, Kirchen, but I don't think they were misogynists. Hitler had Eva Braun. Goebbels was a womanizer. Most of the others were family men. Maybe it's got something to do with Kay making them homosexual. He turned, intending to ask, but she was intent on the service.

He said nothing, listening to that elegant voice, that could make such bloodthirsty sentiments sound poetic. There was stuff now about race defilement—that figured, then something about Hitler and the Thunderer. Apparently they formed a Duality. While he was still trying to work that out the Knight finished, coughed again, and saluted the congregation. The ceremony was over.

"Is that it?" he whispered to Kay. Below, the singers were moving out of their seats with military precision. They formed a neat bloc in front of the choirstalls, then marched, in formation, down the aisle. The drummer and the pair at the organ followed, and after a pause, the congregation.

He nudged Kay, still wanting an answer. She shook her head. The Knight, Phil suddenly noticed, was not among the marchers. "Where is the old man?" he asked, and she replied: "In the Hitler Chapel, resting. He has another service to conduct shortly."

At the same time Phil heard, from far below, shouting, of which he caught only the final imprecation not to dawdle. He sat back, watching the church empty, until only two brawny men remained, who were collecting the wooden chairs and stacking them against the walls. Then they too left. What now? wondered Phil.

Then he heard sounds below, shuffling and whimpers, and a body of people came slowly into sight, not marching, but straggling. They were all dressed in jacket and trousers of an ugly dun-brown, and their downcast heads were shaved.

"Jesus!" thought Phil, appalled at this mass of ugliness. The Knight had reappeared and was walking, shoulders back, white head erect, towards the mass of brown, which as he neared emitted shrill, terrified cries. Another bearded man, carrying a big stick, moved among the crowd; eddying like a sheepdog he brought them to a halt, a disorganized clump halfway up the church. When all stood still he saluted the Knight and marched quickly out of the church. Far below huge doors slammed.

"I hadn't thought of it until now," Kay murmured, "but they could, in theory, while alone in the church with the Knight, tear him to pieces."

"You mean the ones with the shaved heads? Are they from a concentration camp?"

"They live in a cage, yes."

"What are they? Jews? Communists?"

"Listen to them!" said Kay. The Knight had stopped, yet the screams continued. Phil traced one of the thin sounds to a short figure, its naked head almost too big for its puny body. Why, that's a boy! he thought, then almost immediately spotted another, his head half buried in the lap of an elderly adult. It's kids who are screaming, he realized, indignant. What's the old man think he's doing, scaring those little guys like that?

The form of what was unmistakably a pregnant woman, despite the shaved head, and the unfeminine, unflattering garb, caught his eye. Shouldn't she be sitting down? he

thought. She doesn't look too good. He could distinguish other full-bellied figures in the crowd, and had started to make a count before he became distracted by the number of people who were weeping—children, the pregnant females, old folk, young adults, they were snivelling or sobbing or howling unrestrainedly.

He glanced at Kay, and saw her eyes were damp. Embarrassed, he looked back down again and suddenly became aware that besides the factor of dress in common, all were narrow-shouldered and slight. Though none wore dresses or makeup, below him was a company of—

"Women," said Kay, and below her the Knight shouted: "Frauen!" Phil jumped at the sound of that deep voice, but felt, besides the physical reaction, a more profound shock. Kay was regarding him intensely again.

"Phil," she said, "didn't you remember the Women's Worship from my book?"

He hadn't, until now, because those shaven heads, that abject misery, had upset him so much that he had put *Swastika Night* out of his conscious memory.

"No," he said truthfully.

"You must have had some inkling from what von Hess said. Or from the men-only ceremony."

"I thought I saw some girls," he said, recalling the page-turner, and a few beardless faces among the congregation.

"Immature boys," she said. "You sat through the service and never noticed the absence of women!"

She had an all too familiar look on her face. He had seen it on Dorothy, his mother; on Anne; and on his previous two wives. It said: Men!

"That's right," he said aggressively. "But you confused me with the longhairs. Hey, what have you got, some sorta hair fetish? Why shave the women?"

"They can't be allowed to be beautiful," she said sadly. "Because they are only kept for breeding. They are worms, remember? A beautiful woman has power over men, and in this world women are powerless. The society depends upon it. This service reinforces the message, by telling them it is their sacred duty to be submissive and bear sons."

"You got one helluva warped vision!" he said. "I read all about the Nazis for my book, and they never put women in camps, unless they were Communist, or Jewish, or . . ."

"Feminists," she finished.

* * *

A problem with writing a metafiction deriving from non-canonical works of literature is the degree of familiarity these works have to the reader, as opposed to the writer. Dick is famous enough to have had songs written about him and his dead twin sister, a figure with whom he was obsessed ("Sister" by avant-garde popsters Sonic Youth). Burdekin remains obscure. A biography, like those on Dick, would probably make her accessible, given the increasing interest in literary lives, as opposed to works, though these create the interest in the author in the first place.

Peter McNamara, who edited "Kay & Phil" in the Australian anthology *Alien Shores,* initially thought Kay was

my invention; I responded by sending him the opening pages of *Swastika Night,* describing the Women's Worship. He found it "depressing". A. Susan Williams, who reprinted the story in *The Penguin Book of Modern Fantasy by Women,* was better informed, having *Swastika Night* on her bookshelf. The reactions of readers who have never heard of either writer intrigues me, but as yet I have yet to hear of anyone reading the story as straight fiction, rather than metafiction.

* * *

"Why?" he said finally. "Why make the Nazis treat women like that? It's . . . horrible."

"It's not so far removed from the real situation of women throughout the centuries," she said. "And the germs of it are present in the Nazi writings. I believed when I wrote the book, though not many agreed with me, that the Nazis were capable of exterminating the Jews. And after that, what next? The Nazi system fed upon hate, it needed an enemy. Why not the oldest?"

"The oldest?" he repeated, thinking: I don't hate women, although I don't get on with Dorothy, and things with Anne aren't so good now. . . .

She sighed. "I was married once."

"I've done it three times," he said glumly.

"You amaze me. After I left my husband, in Sydney, Australia, I made sure that I never again lived with a person of the opposite sex. It's too hard, Phil, being with someone who is human, like you, but oh, so different!"

Is it ever, thought Phil.

"We fear the other, who is not like us, but is necessary for the continuance of the race. If not for that, I suspect men would have exterminated women long ago."

"That's too dark, Kay," he said. "I can't accept that. I think we'll hafta agree to differ there."

"As we do with our separate visions of the fascist world?" she said.

"Yeah!" and they shook on it.

* * *

In Brunswick, the Asians, chief targets of National Action, are a minority, with the ethnic dominance chiefly Lebanese and Turkish. My parents, returned from living in a very Anglo area of Queensland, tried not to goggle at the headscarved women. Hijab takes a local multitude of forms, from Turkish teenage girls in white scarves, baggy shirts and baggier jeans, to the loose dull-colored mackintoshes and black scarves of their mothers, to the Somali women shrouded as voluminously as medieval nuns, but in brilliant color. Only twice have I seen a woman robed in black, with only eyes visible—both times I felt an obscure and no doubt illogical urge to throw back my head and scream. Like the locks of the Rastafarian men in Jamaica and England, hijab renders ethnicity immediately identifiable. National Action members were alleged in the local paper to have broken the arm of a Somali woman in Northcote—did her dress identify her as an easy victim?

In St. Kilda, on the other side of town, women's bodies are similarly concealed, as part of the Orthodox Jewish faith, though given that they use wigs as head-coverings, they are again, less identifiable. The twain, in any case, never meet. In Sydney Road, the Muslim and Catholic religious shopfronts are almost opposite; it might seem appropriate for the religion that influenced them both to be present here too, but the population levels to support it are simply not present. The posters around Brunswick vilifying National Action used Nazi imagery, which might have been extremely relevant to liberal Anglos, and those recollecting the second world war, but to Lebanese and others displaced by Zionism, had the contrary effect.

I saw a woman defacing one of these posters, as I got off the tram. She was familiar—middle-aged, glasses, her dress apparently an compromise between traditional dictums and the Australian secular, for her macintosh was belted, and her hair visible (dark, streaked with grey) under a hat. I can't recall what she wrote now, but it was anti-Zionist. She looked up and caught me eyeing her. Maybe I raised an eyebrow, because she screamed:

"Hundreds of Arabs! Killed by fucking Jews!"

And in front of my eyes she brandished the *Age,* a photo spread across the front page like a scar, showing bodies in the mosque at Hebron.

Courtesy, or chicken-heartedness, caused me to say, truthfully: "I didn't know."

(I have seldom been good at emotional confrontations.)

Maybe this satisfied her, for she snapped the paper shut and strode off. As luck had it we proved to be proximate neighbors, for I followed her, ten footsteps behind her poker-stiff back in its white mac, to Frederick Street before she turned off into an alley, without any further words spoken.

(We have seen each other several times since then, and our eyes meet in recognition, but in silence.)

But what was I supposed to do? Take her into my house, sit her down at the computer and show her, screen by screen, "Kay & Phil"? Would it have even had the slightest relevance to her.

I don't know. ◘

EXPLORERS

by Gwyneth Jones

illustrated by Freddie Baer

When I was a very small child my big sister and I used to play at climbing Everest. It was 1954, the triumph of Hilary and Sherpa Tenzing was still news. (We didn't know Tenzing Norgay's personal name, the private identity of the native guide was not part of the story in those days.) I was two, my sister was five. We climbed, roped together with the clothes line, along the hall, up the steep and narrow stairs to the landing, up to the dressing table in my parents' room, which was the summit. There were never many photographs of me at that time. I don't think there are any surviving now, though there's a picture of my sister as a toddler, with a big almost bald head and a silk dress with *real smocking*. The smocking was important: I remember regarding her baby dresses as a sign of first-child status. I have a blurred sense of the physical presence of that child, me: a stout little girl with deep-set eyes, over-large brow, round cheeks, fair hair curling into a drake's tail at the nape. I have a *feeling* of climbing the stairs hand over hand, breathing hard, interested in the trapped grit and the scratchiness of the pile. I can't know if that's an original Everest expedition record. Recovering memory so ancient is like trying to retrieve DNA from old bones, it's well nigh impossible to be sure there has been no contamination. My mother tells me she used to find us climbing, and try to separate me from some of the expedition's baggage. I was laden, my big sister wasn't carrying a thing. Rosamund wouldn't allow it, and I defended her rights. "I'm the Sherpa, Mummy." I said. "I'm *supposed* to carry everything." My mother thinks this story is killingly funny. Me, I don't remember the exchange at all, but I still don't like being first or going first into anything. I cause jams in doorways when my minders try to usher me forward at literary events. I hurt the feelings of chivalrous gentlemen. It's not that I'm not sensible of the honour. It's visceral: I'm a middle child, I don't *like* that vulnerable position. My shoulders itch for the knives.... It's funny that of we three sisters I'm the one who became the feminist, the dangerous radical, while the other two—trailblazers and rebels when I was conciliatory; always the *good* child—are fiercely traditional on the question of a woman's place in the scheme of things. My views make them furious so I avoid family confrontations on gender politics. I generally avoid confrontations, with anyone. But I don't change my mind. I'm not good at changing my mind.

I spent my childhood in an atmosphere of privilege. We were minor aristocracy in the parish of Mount Carmel, Blackley, Manchester. (You say it *Blake*ley, by the way. The day I met someone who didn't know that without being told was an epoch in my life.) We had bookcases full of books: my father's small library of pocket edition french classics, *Lettres De Mon Moulin; Jacques Le Fataliste;* the Desert Fathers, Henry Morton's *In the Steps of the Master;* Keats' collected poems in blue cloth, the engravings protected by delicate tissue paper. They were all old books, shabby books, many of them treasured finds from my mother's lifetime of grubbing in the Old Book Stalls on

Shudehill in the centre of Manchester. (The city centre as tiny and grubby then as it is now, but in those days still ravaged by WWII bomb damage; and all the magnificent Victorian civic buildings still blanketed in a dignified soot-black from coal smoke.) We had a piano. (My parents scrimped and saved to waste years of music teaching fees. We children were marginally talented but superbly, invincibly lazy.) We had a tape recorder, as soon as the first commercial reel-to-reel machines appeared (we tried to record our hamster's heartbeat). We had the first television in our street. We didn't have much money, especially not after my father's accident. But we knew who "the poor" were and they definitely weren't us. I wasn't in the least perturbed by the fact that many of "the poor" in our neighbourhood seemed to have a lot more cash than we did. That was the way it was supposed to be. Shabbiness, in the ideal world of my books, was the ultimate sign of being the people who don't have to prove anything to anyone. My childhood was *informed*—given its psychic structure—by the golden age of children's literature. I read *Swallows and Amazons,* and *Narnia.* I read Elfrida Vipont, Frances Hodgson-Burnett, William Mayne, E. Nesbit, Antonia Forrest, Elinor Lyon, Geoffery Trease. I absorbed, without question, the ethos of the ideal English middle class family which pervades all of that fiction—a family that inhabits a misty historical period somewhere in the last decades of Empire: modestly well-bred, devoid of material aspirations, delighting in hardship, gentle but wary in their dealings with lesser mortals; full of casual erudition about famous explorers, sailing, falconry, mountain climbing . . .

Lying on the musty carpet in the front parlour of my grandmother's house down in Blackley village, which was also my uncle John's bedroom (in this model labourer's cottage, where seven children shared the four rooms with their parents, where indoor sanitation never arrived; and my grandmother still kept hens in the yard when I was very small) I studied Mr. Sherlock Holmes' adventures in damp, bound copies of the *Strand* magazine; and leaved through big blue volumes of *Punch,* which I only liked for the old-fashioned cartoons. I knew all the stories that the children in my library books knew, the same old jokes, the same great names. I followed the same code of behaviour. My experience seemed identical to theirs. I was very surprised when I reached Sussex University (which was at the time, the early seventies, a fashionable institution—a finishing school on the south coast for the children of the left-wing middle classes) and met the contemporary versions of my role models—the modestly gilded youths who might really, as children, have crewed the *Swallow* in their holidays from boarding school, or visited Narnia through the wardrobe in an empty room, in some labyrinthine country home. I was surprised because they didn't know me. They were puzzled by the fact that I didn't speak working-class heroine. My accent placed me—as accents did and still do in this country—but my idiom was bizarrely at odds with the obvious truth about my place in the British class structure. It was in those days that I learned to call myself "poor" and "working class", greatly to my parents' disgust—my parents, who knew what poverty was, and had fought against its evils all their lives. I knew myself that it was a nonsensical description. I have always had plenty to eat. I can read. But it was socially necessary. Periodically, since then, I find myself stumbling again into this uneasy position. Was I poor or was I rich, when I was a little girl? Shall I present myself as a goosegirl with a scholarship, or as a declassé princess, a sort of Mancunian Tess of the D'Urbevilles? It depends very much who I'm talking to. Lately I've met writers of my own age from the Indian subcontinent who have a curiously similar problem. We were raised in Manchester, in Bombay, Calcutta, Madras, in our comfortable, scrubby lower middle class homes, on Marmite sandwiches, Huntley and Palmers biscuits, Bluebird Toffees, Johnners' cricket commentary, *Childrens' Favourites* on the radio, *Hancock's Half Hour.* We grew up clinging with childhood's deep affection to the rituals of an alien culture. Our psychic lives are built on a totally spurious sense of belonging; a whole history of false memories. It's strange, but in the end I find I like the compromise. A *real* "sense of belonging"—of unearned and unassailable privilege—would be a serious embarrassment to me. A fake one is fine.

When we used to climb Mount Everest, my sister and I shared the back bedroom. It overlooked the small dank yard we called our back garden, with the coalshed and a brick-built outhouse which held an outside toilet and a stone floored "wash-house". These solid Edwardian terraced houses were built before running water moved indoors: my mother remembered the regular "mangle clinics" at the local hospital, for the peculiar injuries inseparable from washing day. Rosamund taught me to stare at the light bulb on winter mornings, until when I looked away there were coloured horseshoes flying everywhere. We used to chase them and try to catch them in our slippers. She was a leopard, associated with the leopard in *Just So Stories* but lolloping instead of dignified. The leopard was always apologising for the mayhem it caused: *good grouch, its in grouches.* When there were three of us she, as the oldest, moved into the tiny "spare" room next to the bathroom, and my younger sister Jacinta and I shared the back room. I hated that. Life revolved around the obsessive constructions of string with which I tried to divide our separate territories—to no avail. All my attempts to keep the boundaries marked foundered on my sibling's conviction that anything I possessed was by definition desirable. Rosamund had never had that problem with me: it was very unfair. And Jacinta was ill, not chronically like me but in spectacular bursts. The night that she went down with mumps everybody rushed around and took her off to be comforted. They forgot about her bedding. I was left with an eiderdown full of vomit rolled over the end of my bed. I remember sitting shivering and looking at it in the half dark, utterly disgusted. It is a furious memory: *having nowhere to go, no space of my own.*

There was a drainpipe outside the window (there still is). On rainy windy nights, when everything out there was glistening black, I knelt and stared, (trying to pretend my sister didn't exist) at a vista of endless roofs, chimneys, red brick

walls, stone cobbled alleys, glowing street lamps. I wanted to climb out in my pyjamas: down the pipe, over the gate, into the alley and off into the wild world. Wet darkness, slate roofs and cobbles. I put that odd image of freedom into my first published book. Typically, I trapped it in a story in which the girl escapes *in order to learn better* and comes back to cope with everything. That's the kind of thing that happens when you cannibalise your fantasies into fiction. Resolution, storyteller's demon, gets at them and they're never the same.

Later still we three girls shared the big front room. Our parents moved into the back room and our brother, the boy, had a room of his own. I wonder if his unjust takeover still rankles in Rosamund's breast? I expect it does. In her fiction and her journalism (she writes regularly for *Country Living)* my sister promotes the ancient tradition of manworship. But she treats my brother like an honorary human being. I've never seen any sign of her worshiping *him.* I spent some important winters in that big room when I was eleven, twelve, thirteen. When I was ill I had it to myself all day, and I was ill for weeks at a time. I was famous for the recalcitrance of my bronchitis. The wall in the alcove where my bed used to be must still be covered—under several layers of wallpaper—with the giant crayoned cats I drew in the winter I was twelve, when I succumbed to one of my fits while the room was being redecorated. The dressing table that had been the summit of Everest was still there. It survived until after I left for Sussex: smelling of old talcum powder, shorn of its triple-mirrors; the veneer coming away from its bulbous curved drawers. It was Utility furniture. No matter how battered, it would never surrender.

It's gone now. The only piece of furniture that remains from my first world is *Daddy's desk,* which used to stand in my parents' room when we were climbing Everest. It held the Italian picture book of Pinocchio, a printed book in which the words, most improperly, were not in print but in looping joined-up writing; and the French children's book of the same vintage *Fleure Du Coquelicot, L'Orgueilleuse.* There was a postcard from Assisi, grey cracks of age across the turquoise blue sky above the Basilica, cigarette cards bound in withered elastic bands: *British Trees in Winter.* There was a rent book from the flat my parents lived in when they were first married (the figures involved already awesomely small). Baby cards for the first born. Daddy's campaign medals . . . The campaign medals were not loved. They later migrated to the shoe-polishing drawer in the kitchen. Which was appropriate because the army's real gift to my father was his perfectionist skill in a range of domestic tasks: shoe polishing, boots scraping, potato peeling, beds made with knife-edge hospital corners. My father must have spent a *lot* of time, I deduced eventually, on punishment detail. But he didn't mind. He genuinely liked the work. I know this not only from the evidence of his beautiful skills, but because I had the same experience myself at my Convent Grammar School. I was always being thrown out of the ladylike Domestic Science classes and sent to work for the nuns in the proper kitchens next door. I was very happy there, scrubbing vast pans until they shone, while the sisters hulled the seeds out of glowing heaps of rosehips for the winter supply of rosehip syrup. Domestic skivvying was the kind of obsessive, muscular work I could appreciate; and I loved the nuns. They loved me too. They forgot that I was being punished and could never understand why the Domestic Science teacher hated me with such passion. (They'd have had more sympathy for her if they'd ever tried to teach me to sew a broderie anglaise blouse.)

My father was in Signals. We had a periscope from a German tank that he'd brought hack from the desert, it was a splendid toy. He made sergeant six times (according to legend, possibly you could whittle that down a bit); but never kept his stripes. *Your father* my mother used to say *just was not army material. They tried hard to use him, because they could see he was worth something. But they couldn't.*

My father met my mother on an anti-Franco march, so the story goes, when he was twenty-four and she was fourteen. She was a grammar school girl expected to go to Cambridge (She didn't. She had decided that teaching little children was the most important work in the world. So she wanted to teach infants, and she wouldn't be persuaded out of it). He was a garment cutter, and a trade unionist. When the war broke out my mother was evacuated from her teacher training college to Worth Priory in Sussex. She remembered and passed on to me a dream of beechwoods, wildflowers; the secret curves of the green downs. In 1940 my father sent her a telegram Valentine's day greeting. She was hauled to the principal's office and it was solemnly read out to her. On Corpus Christi the traditional flower-decked altars were set out around the priory grounds. The girls thought they heard thunder and were afraid the flowers and the procession would be ruined: but an old monk said, no that's not thunder. That's the big guns in Flanders. I remember the sound from last time. The guns never stopped then all those hot early summer weeks, night and day, getting closer. The Home Guard came to tell the girl students what to do in case of invasion. They were to carry pepperpots in their purses. If a German soldier attacked you, you were to shake the pepper in his eyes. My mother says she was terrified. After Dunkirk the invasion threat was so real that the evacuees were sent back to Liverpool—just in time for the first big bombing raids. The Catholic Teacher Training College wasn't far from Liverpool docks: not a healthy location. She was put on the train to Manchester in her nightdress once, after a night that had been so bad there was nowhere for the students to go, no clothes for them to wear; and no quicker way of letting parents know that their daughters were still alive. My father worked as a hospital orderly until he was conscripted. He sent postcards from Italy, the Dolomites, Austria. He camped in the foothills of Vesuvius, and remembers they were not allowed to eat melons, because the fruit ripened lying in foul water and it would give you dysentery. He never fired a shot in anger except that once, when he was guarding Italian prisoners in the desert—with "one up the spout" as regulations required—he tripped and sent a rifle bullet through his colonel's tent. Luckily the colonel escaped unharmed. He learned Italian from his prisoners. It came in useful later

when they headed north, to Sicily and those terrible beachheads. He taught us Morse code, or tried to: we were too lazy. All I can remember is SOS: ditditdit dadada ditditdit. And you must always identify yourself at the start and end of any message: *always.* Log on, log off. My mother still answers the phone by announcing her number, clearly and distinctly. I did the same myself for years and years until I was finally laughed out of it, but I was uneasy ever afterwards. It was a great relief to get an answering machine and revert to something like proper signals etiquette.

The record itself is not significant. The material objects and the memories have been sifted like fossils in the rock beds: preserved or destroyed by purely mechanical processes. Somebody has cleared out the desk from time to time—tackling the first strata to present themselves with discrimination and then surrendering to inertia, throwing things out or stowing them back according to the convenience or otherwise of their size and shape; according to whether or not the waste bin was full. One could draw an image of the probability of a baby-card's survival—a swirl of false-coloured convergence determined by factors so slight and complex as to defy reason: randomness is complexity in disguise. When I was a child *science* was incapable of describing ordinary events. At my school physics and chemistry were taught by men, which was already an admission of defeat in that proudly academic female world. And then, a male teacher who was teaching science at a girls' school in the sixties had abandoned hope on his own account. They were a miserable crew and our lessons in hard science were a painful farce. At best we wrote down manifest untruths about experiments that had failed to behave as they should. Any curiosity I had about how the world works (and I thought about such things a good deal, by natural inclination) had no place in the labs. Pure speculation only happened in religious lessons. Metaphysics was the nearest I came to understanding what sort of thing physics might be. Biology was the exception. It was taught by a woman, a large formidable woman in a vast greeny-black academic gown. I was good at Biology. There was nothing alluringly weird about it, no theories of everything. But I liked the way it fitted together, the nestling of shape on shape and function on function: nitrogen fixation, photosynthesis; the reproduction of seedless plants; haploid and diploid forms.

I climbed Everest when I was two. Before I was five I had become a member of the Clover Club. This was a select association. There were five of us: me and my sister and three other girls, the twins Josie and Clare and their little sister Christine, who were the children of a friend of my mother's and lived two streets away. My mother's friendship with Mrs. Brunt was a friendship of circumstance more than like-mindedness or natural attraction. Ours was the same, and bound in hoops of steel as such connections are. We went to the same schools and the same church. We were allowed to play out on our own, on Rosamund's responsibility, until sunset on weekdays and all day Saturday if the weather was fine. We played make-believe games based on *Narnia* and on the first children's television dramas: *William Tell, Robin Hood.* We fought physical and painful battles with our enemies (broadly speaking, the children in our streets who were not going to pass a vital public exam called the eleven plus). I remember, in glimpses, that some of the fantasy games were *intense.* But above all we were explorers.

We made our first expeditions on an expanse of waste ground behind the houses opposite ours. It was known as *The Tip.* It was a desolation of rubble and twisted metal, drowned in rosebay willowherb and aromatic wormwood in the summer, naked heaps of builders' waste and smouldering rubbish in winter. Interesting fragments sometimes emerged from the wrack: charred pages of magazines with pictures of fat naked women in them. My part of Lancashire is a maze of wet grooves in damp moorland. In the valleys, if they're left wild, alders and black poplars and willows grow. In this valley Blackley village proper lay in the depths, with the ICI dyeworks and the Co-op biscuit factory its chief landmarks; and surrounded by the grim, packed slum streets that crawled out from the centre of Manchester. *The Tip* occupied the slopes between the village and our houses, extending beyond *the Incinerator,* the rubbish-burning blockhouse whose foul red-brick chimney loomed large on the borders of our territory, into the scrap-metal stained swampy bed of a stream that ran into the river Irk. Industry has been established in these valleys, where the water is pure and plentiful, since before the steam revolution. I suppose it was the water in the Irk that first encouraged the dye-works. In the days of the Clover Club *the ICI* was a vast monster that hissed and steamed and belched and stank, making the river run orange and green and blue; creating the most splendid, choking, terrible winter fogs. An expedition to *the stinky pipes* from our house was our first grand exploration. The Tip valley was perilous. It had an evil atmosphere. The houses that surrounded it were out of sight, the slopes were steep all round you; and it was very still. Even the plants were strange, at least we thought so. We were afraid of sinking into the iron-red swamp. We roped-up to cross it. Once we found the shell of a tortoise, minus its occupant. Once when I was five we thought we'd found a dead horse. The others sent me to investigate. In fact I volunteered, because I wanted to be called the bravey of the gang. It was a horsehair sofa someone had dumped. But it had presence: it frightened me.

For relaxation we went to Clover Wood, where another, relatively clean stream ran under Rochdale Road from the public park called Boggarthole Clough. (A *clough,* pronounced *cluff,* is a wooded valley. When I realised there were people to whom that word sounded strange, it was another epoch.) The pitiable children who were not explorers made cardboard-box slides on the red sandy hill that ran down to the stream. We liked to slide too, but we had better things to do. We built dams and camps and huts of old bricks: making a mortar out of red sand and water that was satisfyingly realistic as long as it stayed wet. Later there was Damhead farm, two miles up the road towards Rochdale and Saddleworth moor (where the Moors Murderers were burying their victims). In those days this land was still quite rural. Sometimes we trekked out there on foot, sometimes we took the bus

and didn't start being explorers until we got off. We were naturalists then, like Darwin on the Beagle. We collected specimens from the old mill pond: fresh water mussels, sticklebacks; we went in mortal terror of the big fat horse-leeches. We were archaeologists and dug up cows' teeth, we were thrilled if we spotted a rabbit. In June the meadows were full of buttercups and daisies and sorrel: gold and white and red. In September there were masses of blackberries. Sometimes the fields flooded, and we went rafting.

Whatever we were doing and wherever we went we carried rations, first aid, a torch and rope. We made maps. We had meetings in the wash-house, and kept up the Club logbook (not very well, we were too lazy). My sister made rules about the type of food that could be classed as rations. Anything smuggled from a meal was disqualified. We semi-stole, like Spartan boys: we took biscuits from the larder and handfuls of sultanas from the blue sugar-paper bags that came with the weekly grocery order from the Co-op. First aid was an aspirin bottle full of Dettol, and some clean rags. When we were older my uncle John, my mother's youngest brother, took us on more ambitious expeditions. He introduced us to cooking outdoors, cold stews full of rock hard potatoes. There were plans for real camping with him, which never happened (to my relief). Once we made an expedition that took us the length of the Rochdale canal.

Our *zeitgeist* came from an ideal that was nostalgic from the moment of its creation. We were pretending to be the children in our library books: children in fictions invented by middle-aged men, who wrote to repair the damage that had been done to them by the British Middle Class childhood they described so lovingly. We enacted a failing culture's retreat into its dreamtime. We put on the masks and danced the dance of our powerful ancestors: Scott, Nansen, Cook, Darwin, Amundsen, Hilary, Shackleton. But while we enacted this mourning ritual we were living in a world where the great expedition was still in progress. We hated the signs of our species' territorial expansion, which we saw exclusively in terms of playgrounds robbed and despoiled. We saw no connection between this activity and our play. And yet it was the same adventure. There was still territory unmapped then, over all the horizons. One could go further and find more. My mother, who loved the future, believed that the expedition would never end. When we were on holiday in Arthur Ransome territory, in the English Lake district, she pointed out the towers of Windscale Nuclear Power Station*, and told us that the dragon had been tamed. It would work for us now. There would be more and more leisure and beauty, university education and piano lessons for everyone, until we reached the stars: and still on, more and more. She followed the Apollo programme passionately (though she didn't neglect the Russians, she was not partisan). In July 1969 we had an all-night party at my house. This was the pinnacle of teen-rebel wild dreams in Mount Carmel parish, and *it was my mother's idea,* which staggered our contemporaries. It was the strawberry season. In those days there were still seasonal gluts, they were dirt cheap and we had mounds of them. We had strawberry fights at midnight. By three A.M. the survivors were lying comatose, wrapped in blankets. My mother went round shaking people awake: *you've got to see this, this is important.* So the explorers witnessed the event that seemed to be a beginning, and which we now feel as the final turning point, the beginning of an end. My friend Stan Robinson has written a story (it's in his collection *Remaking History)* in which securely established lunar colonists in an alternative near-future rehearse the twists of history, little right-turns instead of wrong, that made twenty-first century amateur dramatics on the moon possible. Stan's optimism moves and amazes me. I wish I thought it was that easy: a few nips and tucks to alter the whole massive weight of two million years, the territorial imperative on its pre-programmed mission to implode. I think of a different story, (call it the British variation) in which the truth about the situation becomes manifest not over painful decades but on that first trip itself. The dreadful mistakes that (as we watched among the squashed berries) nearly destroyed my mother's festival have not miraculously compounded themselves into success. The disaster has happened. There is no possibility of rescue. The shipwrecked mariners have survived their crash landing to endure, patiently, to the inevitable end. Somebody, doesn't matter who, records a last message: *it seems a pity, but I do not think I can talk more . . .* Imagine us all crouched around our TVs, listening to that and trying to make out the grainy blue images. Now that would be a true romance.

When I was five my parents took us on our first holiday to the English Lakes, where they'd spent their honeymoon. Then and for years later we children pored over the maps in the Swallow and Amazons books, without managing to work out that Ransome's lake was neither Windermere—where we stayed—nor Coniston, the next lake along to west; but a combination of the two. While we doggedly struggled to identify fictional landmarks in the real world, I fell passionately in love. Like a prince in a fairytale I had fallen in love with a picture, and loved the picture's original on sight. At home in Manchester I fell in love with a row of black poplars that stood opposite the church of Our Lady Of Mount Carmel where we went to Mass on Sunday. They had ropey, knotted black trunks like hanks of tarry twine. Their leaves were yellow and heartshaped, in spring their masses of purplish catkins fell and drifted in the roadside puddles. The day they were cut down I was as heart-broken as I will ever be in my life: *my aspens dear, whose airy cages quelled; quelled or quenched in leaves the leaping sun, are felled, are all felled.* I fell in love with places and living things, desperately and hopelessly in love, long before I was considered old enough to be interested in boys. This is the fate of imaginative girl-children who are protected from what people call the facts of life. Emotional pathways are opened to other stimuli, a deep and over-subtle understanding of *passion* develops too soon. By the time I emerged, at fifteen or sixteen, from the segregation that I'd accepted without the

*Windscale: aka, *Sellafield.* (to protect the vulnerable, we change the name, right?)

slightest resistance, I was incapable of finding courtship rituals romantic *You buy me this, I let you do that.* It made sense, fair enough, supposing I wanted to go to the cinema; or venture into one of the many situations where an unaccompanied female would be uncomfortable. But only a fool (thought I) would get sentimental over such blatant self-interested horse-trading. I would grow up bemused by the whole role that is said to be feminine.

I wasn't, however, an easy convert to feminism. My mother, my sisters, the teachers at my schools, had been telling me what to do all my life. When I eventually met the women's movement, I was not impressed by the revelation that *women are powerful.* I did not hate my mother, or fear to "become her". Far from it! But I did not agree that women were more gentle, more wise or morally superior creatures. This was not my experience, for whom women had been most of the world. When I was young I could say, along with many women of my generation, single-sex educated, taught to aspire without limit, just like boys: *I don't know much harm of men. I never had much to do with them. But women have oppressed me plenty ...* When we were explorers we didn't play with boys, though we fought a campaign or two with those boys who were not going to pass the eleven plus exam. We were enacting supposedly masculine fantasies, but that didn't worry us in the least. In the golden age, between two world wars, misogyny was not a big feature in children's fiction. Nobody ever called Captain Nancy Blackett maladjusted, because she liked to wear shorts and was the captain of her own ship. Nobody in the books ever cheeked Mate Susan either: or showed anything but respect for her domestic arts and steely control over the commissariat. When I was thirteen, fourteen, fifteen, I grieved over the metamorphosis that I believed was inevitable. I believed that one day (my periods had started, without having any effect on my mind, but I supposed it would happen soon) I would turn into a woman. But I never did. It was too late for me to change. The wiring was no longer malleable. The ideals of the story books—courage, wit, achievement, endurance, pugnacity, the devotion to adventure—were mine forever. It was too late to become a girl, I had no desire to be a boy. I had to he a person.

I continue to resist the culture of feminism, whenever it slides into gender nationalism—which is all the time. I can't share the resentment of the oppressed, I have no childhood memories of wounding misogyny. I found out plenty about wounding misogyny later; and I'm still learning. But childhood is what matters, and in my childhood I learned to be neither a girl nor a boy. I do not feel *my self* to be either "male" or "female". I feel *my self* to be an explorer, an artist, a fantasist. What I learned, maybe the most deeply imprinted lesson, was displacement. If we are defined as Plato thought by what we desire: by what we lack—an idea that resonates enticingly with the emerging sciences of life, the shapes of things to come—then the black poplars have something to do with it; and Lake Windermere; and the gleaming, cold rainy night outside my bedroom window. I am what I lack. I am what I long for and cannot have. I am the thing that knows it is separate. I begin to think that *displacement*—having no place to call your own—is consciousness itself.

It's all gone now. Windermere is a playground for the masses. And good luck to them, by the way, but I won't be sorry when they decide to take themselves off somewhere virtual for their fun. My Blackley playgrounds have vanished under housing development: even the dreadful valley of the tip. The Incinerator is no more. The ICI European dyeworks, our majestic neighbour, is no more. Childhood illness makes writers out of people who spend too many formative weeks lying in bed, becoming addicted to idleness and isolation. Maybe the ICI made an artist out of me. I've returned the favour unconsciously I'm sure, many times. More than once I have consciously made art out of the ICI, transmuting *the stinky pipes* into tragedy or comic backdrop ... I wonder if the people who live in the new houses in the tip valley ever feel uneasy, and how long before the swamp reasserts itself in seeping walls and mouldering timbers? I wonder how it feels to be someone whose first world did not disappear. Someone for whom the streets and paths and trees and rivers remained as they were, who has to squeeze an adult self into the territories of childhood. It would have been no use for me to promise, as so many artists have promised, never to leave my beloved home. The places left me.

When I was two I climbed Everest. When I was eight I climbed Kanchenjunga, the mountain the Swallows and Amazons tackle in their great climbing expedition in the book called *Swallowdale.* This should have been Coniston Old Man, but the debatable fictional geography allowed us to make it Wansfell Pike, a miniature Matterhorn about 500 metres high, that conveniently rises right above the streets of Ambleside, our regular holiday locale. When I was fifteen, on the last and greatest expedition of the Clover Club (reduced to me and our beloved leader, my big sister), I climbed Hellvellyn and tackled Striding Edge in a blizzard. I discovered, particularly on an awesome forced march over the Black Sail pass and through Ennerdale Forest and back in the same day, that I was no longer weak. I was capable of hiking twenty odd hard mountain miles in vile conditions; and getting up and doing it again next day; and the next. I was capable of it. But I did not like it. On that expedition I decided it was time for the Ethiopian to move into different spots, no matter what the leopard thought of the idea.

The first mountain I climbed after climbing Everest up our stairs was Wansfell Pike. The first journey I made as an independent traveller was when I was eleven, and took the train alone from Manchester Piccadilly to visit my Auntie May in Heald Green, a genteel suburb to the south of the city. I was wearing my mother's idea of eyecatching best clothes for a young girl: a blue wool cape with green and blue plaid trim and a matching deer-stalker hat. I was a short, plump, pasty child with mousy hair, National Health spectacles and a habitually, comically preoccupied expression. I felt, with justice I believe, that *eyecatching* was the last thing a person like me wanted in their clothes. But explorers don't argue. They endure the burdens of social life, and make escape plans. I rode back from my visit in the dusk, alone on a train

for the second time in my life. One day, I promised myself, I will be on a train like this, *but it will be in Sumatra.* I kept the promise. My next mountains after the Clover Club's last expedition were in the tropics. Gunung Batur, Bromo, Kinabalu. Beautiful Arjuna, who defeated us. One day—one night—fifteen years after my first lone train ride, I put down Naipaul's *The Mimic Men,* which I'd bought on a second hand bookstall in Singapore. I got up from my place in our first class compartment (it was First Class only, on the night train from Panjang to Perembulih) and went down to the end of the carriage. The door was open. I watched a light-painted rectangle of wet greenness, banana fronds and palms rushing by. But I was elsewhere, remembering.

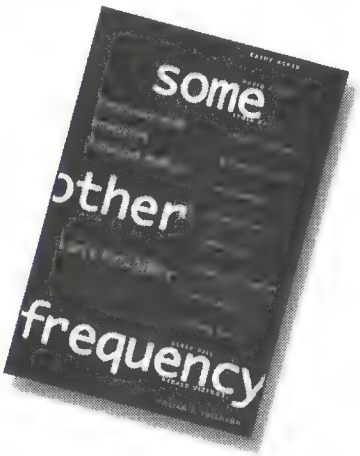
I have never escaped. The world is too small, and there are too many people. Any time that I've struck wildly out into trackless jungle—which has happened, quite literally, rather often—it has been to find myself stumbling into somebody's back yard, and to be instantly surrounded by people who might as well be my relatives, offering me tea and forcing me—in the nicest possible way—to make polite conversation. Like the girl in my story, I have to accept the constraints of resolution. This is the end the music demands, this is the way it has to be. My mother's great expedition ended in July 1969 (or at least it seems to have ended: one should always remember that *anything can happen).* Territorial expansion is over, the whole planet is our campground. There are no more manly adventures into the unknown—only the women and children searching far afield for water and fuel, in the desolation that surrounds our fires. But there is still room, within the mediœval envelope that once more hems us in. There are worlds opening with dazzling complexity in the interstices of the cramped design. I tell myself that we were *explorers.* An explorer is an emissary, not a colonist or pioneer or an invader. Explorers don't set out to sever themselves, to go and never come back. They remain bound to the past, to the people and the places at the start of their journey. They go to find whatever there is to be found and return to tell the tale. I can still do that. I cannot return into the urban countryside where I grew up. But I can still explore, and tell the story of what I have found.

At home in Manchester there's a picture of a jungle scene, executed in powder paint on dark, coarse sugar paper, now crumbling with age. It used to be framed on the wall above the kitchen door until the frame started to fall apart. I believe that I truly remember painting that picture. I was six. I stood in front of my easel in the art room and laid those long, wiggly yellow petals of the giant daisy in the foreground, smoothly onto the paper. I remember deciding to add the small kangaroo who flies through the upper air with such elan, paws tucked protectively around the joey in her pouch . . . A memory is a living thing, holding within itself the history of its own evolution. The original of any experience of the world is buried in the heart of its most complex development. Whenever I put my hands on these keys, to devise a sentence with pleasure and care, the thread reels out unbroken: the little girl who painted the jungle lifts her brush again. I am the child I was. ◘

Some Other Frequency

Interviews with Innovative American Authors

Larry McCaffery



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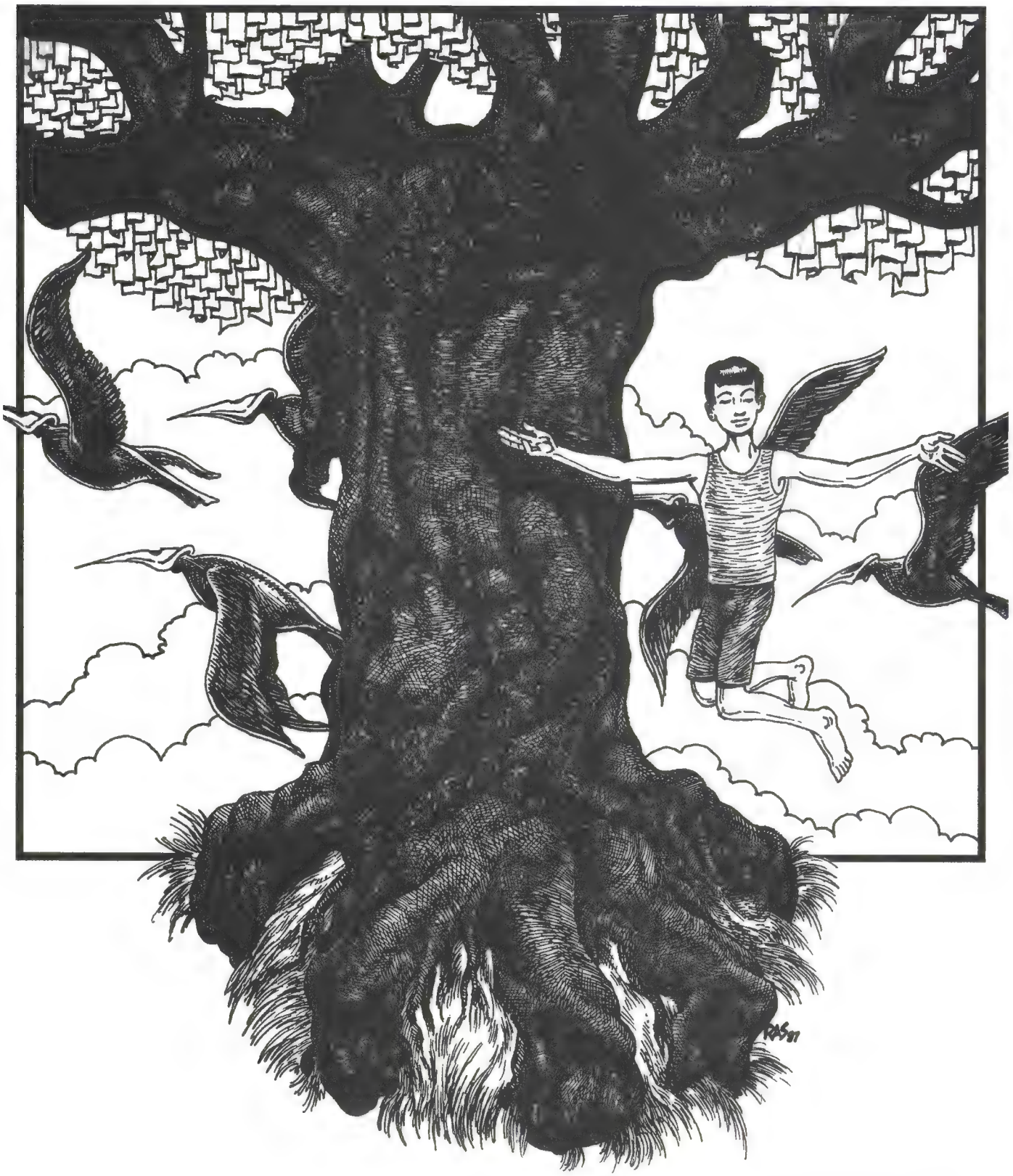

EFFECTIVE ARCANUM

by Don Webb

illustration by Richard Schindler

Take the wordies
from hind brain
tell of weirdies
in a great word-rain
Grimorie of Aloys

Blurbers (those who blurb) say two contradictory things about the work of R.A. Lafferty. Often both poles will appear in the same blurb. Blurbers do not aim for consistency, but instead for creating a mood that will induce the sensory overloaded reader to purchase the book. The two remarks are how familiar Lafferty's work is—he is either compared to Twain (or some likewise wholesomely American figure) or to the folktale, ghost tale, or tall tale. The opposite pole stresses the uniqueness of his work—unique, quirky, one-of-a-kind. It would seem that either the blurbers have indeed read the work, and are hard put to find words to explain the effect of Lafferty's prose on their psyches, or they are merely quoting other blurbers. I wish to argue that Lafferty deliberately creates the mythic effect through a technique I call effective arcanum, and that rather than examining his work with conventional tools of science fiction criticism, we need to examine his system—firstly for our pleasure and secondly so that we may re-create it (because the sign of an authentic religo-magical system is the power of the followers to reproduce the results). It may seem strange to think of Lafferty's writing in terms of religious phenomena, but if you consider the devotion that the small press world has shown, you'll begin to see what I mean. Behold now I speak prophetically. When Lafferty is gone there will be (unfortunately) a lot of bad Lafferty pastiche—not because of the commercial viability of such writing (Lafferty being one of the least commercial writers we have) but because of the desire of the writer to re-create the effects of Lafferty's writing on his or her psyche. In this (and a few other ways as well) Lafferty is very similar to H.P. Lovecraft. Let us examine six ways (there are nine, but three must remain hidden for I use them myself and don't want to give away any of my tricks just yet) in which Lafferty's fiction creates the Unknown rather than the Known, and then let us give some consideration to the strengths and weaknesses of the method (and its reception and lack thereof in the world of science fiction and fantasy). Hopefully some later more qualified writer than I will begin the task of putting Lafferty into the bookshelf of literature where he belongs. By the way, each of these points can be expanded into a dissertation and no doubt will be in the fullness of time.

1 Lafferty uses textual devices to estrange the reader in a hypothetical time before the beginning of the narrative. He comments on the method himself in one of his created texts:

> Atrox Fabulinus, the Roman Rabelais, once broke off the account of his hero Raphaelus in the act of opening a giant goose egg to fry it in an iron skillet of six yards' span. Fabulinus interrupted the action with these words: "Here it becomes necessary to recount to you the history of the world up to this point."
>
> After Fabulinus had given the history of the world up to that point, he took up the action of Raphaelus once more. It happened that the giant goose egg contained a nubile young girl. This revelation would have been startling to a reader who had not just read the history of the world up to that point: which history, being Fabulinian in its treatment, prepared him for the event.
>
> *The Fall of Rome,* Auctore
> (From *East of Laughter)*

By creating a text of seeming antiquity, the defamiliarization of the world is seen as something that already happened before the narrative. The story doesn't have to explain the strange state of affairs it begins with or ends with. This runs counter to the paradigm of science fiction in which texts that are cited are real (or presumed to deal with the hard factual world), and provide a springboard for the Man With A Plan to demonstrate his cleverness based on the facts of the matter. Likewise it violates the paradigms of horror (our everyday world with one intrusion or anomaly which can be isolated or at least explained), and of fantasy (another world with its own consistent laws). The use of created texts (either created out of whole cloth such as the frequently-cited *The Back-Door of History* by Arpud Arutinov or *The Fall of Rome,* an actually published Lafferty book—"auctore" simply being Latin for "by the author", or partial cloth wherein Laffertyisms are attributed to the Psalms or reference made to Aristotle's *Beard in Essential* and *Beard in Existential)* are legitimated by the actual quotations from actual people mixed into the stream. Therefore reality is carefully displaced, sometime somewhere

before either writer or reader has anything to do with it. This is an extremely effective modification of the fairy tale formula of *in illo tempore.* But instead of the "Once upon a time" where we know what the different laws are, Lafferty just convinces us that the laws are different.

2 Lafferty makes use of dead language words to play upon our collective unconscious.

Mainly Hellenisms work their unconscious magic upon us: although like Joyce he combines his Greek with Irish. Note the Puca in *The Reefs of Earth.* Consider the following examples. In *My Heart Leaps Up,* Lafferty's "autobiography" from Chris Drumm, the lead character is named Helen Anastasis. We may sense the *rightness* of the name, but unless we know Greek, we don't realize Anastasis = "against inertness". Likewise in "Continued on the Next Rock" the hero's name of Anteros = "One who loves in return" sadly sums the hero's love and the girl's obstinacy (which are seen as *mechanisms* of their reincarnations—reminding one of the strangely Greek-named heros of the Mummy films: Kharis, whose name means "gift" and Anake, whose name means "necessity"). Lafferty's use of Greek, Latin, Irish, and Hebrew tags is not merely a demonstration of his vast erudition. It is a technique used by magicians for centuries to give their spells potency. Whereas he directs most of his narrative at our conscious—using simple daytime language—he also directs the same tale at our unconscious, achieving a form of meta-communication. This is one of the most subtle forms of displacement. We feel early on in the Lafferty story that more is going on than we know, and at the end of the story that more has gone on than we can know. The use of foreign tags and the use of rhythm discussed below are good tools in displacing the narrative.

3 Lafferty plays upon our subconscious in another way—the use of rhythm.

Yevgeny Zamyatin developed the concept of a "prose foot" as a way of internal pacing in fiction. He saw it as a kind of rhythmic device that by causing the reader to remember an earlier part of the narrative became a force for a choral (as in pertaining to choruses) cohesion that bound the story together in a different way than plot mechanics. This method, which I can't detect in Zamyatin's works (since Russian is Greek to me), is the core of Lafferty's work. He has invented the postmodern equivalent of the Homeric epithet. Now that I've told you what the magician's about to do, see if you can catch the trick the next time. Oops went past you! A couple of examples will suffice. In the short story "The Transcendent Tigers" the device of a rhyming couplet to destroy a city of the world is used throughout the story. We become so in rhythm with the words that Lafferty doesn't have to provide the name of the city when the last half of a couplet ends the story—"Knife and Fork"—(and the reader provides "New York", thus having his own imagination and language complete the terrifying little tale). Likewise rhyming nonsense is the way a character may enter the world of the Shelni in "Ride a Tin Can"—perhaps more significantly the understanding of the nonsense can turn you into a Shelni.

4 Lafferty uses the image of the wonder child to evoke a past that never was.

This is the emotional equivalent to the intellectual process mentioned in #1. Unlike Bradbury who invokes some kind of Norman Rockwell past by visual detail, Lafferty invokes the very rapid sense of childhood as we remember it. His heroes in "Lord Torpedo, Lord Gyroscope". Karl Riproar and Emily Vortex, are typical Lafferty wonder kids who do everything very very fast. His children—as well as his hard-drinking young men—move in a world that has been condensed by memory, and so we match with our own perceived fast and fleeting moments of childhood. Otherwise his children possess special powers, which, unlike the typical mutant of sf or demon-possessed horror kiddo, are never explained. These powers can be anything from the ability to make things disappear in "Seven Day Terror" to—perhaps the greatest Lafferty trick of all—remaining perpetually four years old. This is a wonderful assertion of the fictive impulse. Instead of appealing to our memories he appeals to the type of story we told each other at that age and combines that appeal with the nostalgia we have for our youths. A careful blend there, we read and feel nostalgic for realities that never were. And if we feel nostalgic for realities that weren't—we are displaced before the narrative happens.

5 Lafferty denies the uniqueness of the spectacular events, and by so doing once again displaces reality.

The most outrageous situations are either ignored (as "In Our Block" wherein the presence of a group of beings who can make anything instantly and in any quantity—a favorite Lafferty motif—is simply explained away as there are lots of odd people in the world) or a figure shows up claiming to have previously done the deed, but in a different way. The latter role is usually filled by Willy McGilly. In "Seven Day Terror" he marvels that current kids use a beer can to make a disappearer, when he had used an oatmeal tube. In "Thus we Frustrate Charlemagne" he points out that all he needed to kill historical figures was a dart, rather than a huge computer. And so forth. By denying the uniqueness of a spectacular event, Lafferty simultaneously accomplishes three things. One, he postulates that the world (at least his fictional world) is actually much, much stranger than our own. It is not only broad enough for the strange event, it is broad enough to hold the *laws* which permit the strange event. Two, he postulates that people's memory of wonder is so poor that they generally have forgotten the true marvels of the age. The truly successful people in Lafferty's works—the true geniuses and übermenschen—are Those Who Remember the wonder of world such as Willy McGilly. Three, he

once again dislocates reality before the narrative starts. The reader is not presented with a world that he or she knows with one anomaly to puzzle out, the reader is presented with a world that he or she has never known. Or, to create a more dreamy distancing effect, a world that he or she has forgotten (which leads us to):

6 Lafferty uses the feeling of estrangement, of "I think I've forgotten something", as a mood to displace the narrative.

We've all had those haunted days when we felt that we should've known something more than we knew. Lafferty often invokes that mood as the voice of a tale. Although not the only writer to do this—Robert Pinget comes to mind—Lafferty is certainly the only popular English writer who pulls off this particular trick. Two examples come quickly to mind, in "Thus we Frustrate Charlemagne" the history changers at the Institute for Impure Science decide to change history, but they will have an objective reference to the world before the change, so they can see if their attempt worked. Of course—following a long established tradition in science fiction—the change changes their memories and their external object. Now this is more than commonly interesting because the Institute for Impure Science is here doing to itself what Lafferty does for his readers—changing the rules at some time before the action begins (this is one of the many uses of self reference which haunt Lafferty's work).

A second example would be "What's the Name of that Town?" in which Epikt (note the wonderful Hellenism: Epiktistes means the "Equitable One", a great name for a calculating device that takes all elements (Stoichae) *equally)* sorts his facts to discover that something must be missing. The missing thing is Chicago, and when Epikt pronounces the hidden name, no memory results. Here is a primary Lafferty formula. Even when all the facts point to the mysterious nature of the matter, people (except the Epikt, who as his name implies takes all facts equally—from padding in Hungarian dictionaries to Little Willy jokes about blood and chewing gum—and the most inspired genius of the day Gregory Smirnov who has his tingles of noetic memory) can't piece out what's going on, nor notice their memory lapses. There is a Platonic theme in much of Lafferty's work—the world would no longer seem so dreary if we could only remember it. He even points out the two methods suitable to induce memory: the precision of the Epikt, which he himself shows in researching and coining such names; and the inspiration of Smirnov, which Lafferty shows doubly strongly.

There are two benefits and two drawbacks to Lafferty's use of techniques of estrangement. The first drawback is that since his work doesn't fit the paradigms of science fiction, fantasy or horror writing, the publishing world approaches it with great reluctance. I have never seen a second edition of any of his works. Very few have made it into hardback. With the decline of the short story as a commercial medium, his work more and more has become the province of the small press. The radical openness of his texts, which although they may offer a solution to the particular situation, leave that world more open by suggesting that such have happened before and will happen again have clearly prompted editors to request new endings of several stories. Pick up any collection of Lafferty's shorter works and look at the ends of the stories. Note how many of them have the four or five paragraph ending (in another voice) that in a humorous and off hand fashion undercuts the narrative. The lack of satisfactory endings reflects the need to comply with genre restrictions.

The second drawback is that since Lafferty's use of structure and displacement techniques places him outside of the paradigms of science fiction, and his venues place him outside the scope of academic criticism, very little is said about his work. Although we live in an epoch where the bold academic adventurer is likely to go into the Venusian swamplands of sf, such academic probes are looking for sf in its pure state and will regard sports (particularly those infused with humor) as anathema. Those individuals looking from within the sf world may lack, or simply disdain the linguistic and critical skills needed to begin to reveal that in Lafferty's work there is much more going on than meets the eye. The brave individuals who have attempted to do so, have either merely produced fulsome praise or attempted to classify Lafferty's writings on the basis of superficialities (i.e., calling him a surrealist). Lafferty's use of displacement is not unique, but so few writers have consciously attempted the process, and their works are so varied, that there are no unifying articles, no language for the critic with a day job to draw on. Some bright lad or lass (with the appropriate dignifying letters following their names) may read this and look for the method of displacement in H.P. Lovecraft, James Joyce, Robert Pinget, Gilbert Sorrentino, Flann O'Brien, R.A. Lafferty, Howard Waldrop, and R.A. Wilson. Now there's a book worth reading. The astute observer will note that all the names on the list are Irish saving those which are not.

The first benefit is the sheer memorability of R.A. Lafferty stories. The techniques of displacement, which work well on the shorter work, tend to overweary the reader trying to hold it all in the longer pieces. However any of the shorter pieces once read can be recalled because the effect that his work has on the psyche is on-going. We may think of some classic sf tale, such as an Asimov robot story, and use it to illustrate a point, but people recalling Lafferty tales do so with wonder. As an experiment try to start telling any Lafferty story you know to anyone who has read any sf at all. Notice how early on they say "I read that. It was neat." This is markedly different from the purely nostalgic reaction we have to E.R. Burroughs or Bradbury. I deem Lafferty's stories effective arcanum since they clearly continue to work the soul once read.

The second benefit that Lafferty's stories have is that they give the rest of us something to shoot for. Over my writing desk I keep a copy of the Russian critic Victor Shlovsky's remark, "The technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar' —to make forms difficult, to increase the difficulty and length of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be

prolonged. Art is a way of experiencing the artfulness of an object, the object itself is not important." Shlovsky wasn't writing about Lafferty, but I doubt if few writers could so clearly be an example of art as Shlovsky defines it. ◘

HOW TO:

If you want to try your hand at Lafferty style prose, here are some tips.

1). Get a good dictionary with a great etymological section. The American Heritage Dictionary is probably the best, with its great proto-Indo-European section. Pick a few words that you think will be in your tale. Look up their roots, and work those meanings into your story, no matter how surreal or fantastic it makes it.

2). When you decide what you're going to tell, find a name for your protagonist that describes him or her from a "dead" language. Old Norse, Greek, Old Church Slavonic, Old Irish will do. Never explain the name—just let it work on the unconscious.

3). Be funny.

4). Let the other characters come from your private mythology—you don't have to explain them, any more than you would explain Uncle Henry in a funny story you're telling your mom. Just let the characters wander from story to story and people will begin to recognize them.

5). Hang out in bars, churches and airports listening to people tell stories to each other. Learn to handle your exposition accordingly—i.e., you can break in at any time to handle a new character or fact.

6). Always act as if you're *reminding* someone of a story they know.

7). Be corny and sentimental. Don't avoid any low brow stuff!

8). Don't explain the McGuffin. If it's a tiny moon that floats in the sky, it's a tiny moon. Just be sure to quote some ancient source text that mentions the phenomenon.

9). Read a lot of ancient writers, particularly Lucian, Caesar, Herodotus, and Aristotle. Look for explanations of physics that we know are wrong, and descriptions of foreign lands and peoples that are bizarre. Make these your resources for researching phenomena.

But of these laws I give to you ...
the Great Law is the Third Law.

SOURCES:

The best place for your one-stop Raphael Aloysius Lafferty shopping needs is:

Chris Drumm Books
P.O. Box 445
Polk City, IA 50226

Chris has published five Lafferty chapbooks and can get most anything, has a very cheap selection of used paperbacks, great small press stuff, ethnic CDs, and books on bizarre topics. If you aren't on his mailing list, you ain't cool.

Broken Mirrors Press has a collection of all the Lafferty stories from *Orbit* as well as *Sindbad, the Thirteenth Voyage.*

Broken Mirrors Press
P.O. Box 380473
Cambridge, MA 02238

Edgewood Press does a collection of otherwise uncollected magazine appearances called *Iron Tears.*

Edgewood Press
P.O. Box 264
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United Mythologies publishes no less than eight full length short story collections and novels and six chapbooks.

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Corroboree Press also offers four or five books, including the first volume of the anti-Marxist pro-Sidhe fantasy tetralogy *The Flame is Green.* (Public service announcement: in case you don't know, pronounce "Sidhe" as "she", as in the last syllable of banshee—the other world of Irish lore is making a real life {magical and political} comeback, so it's not a bad time to be on good terms with them, is it CuChulainn?) Corroboree books are available from

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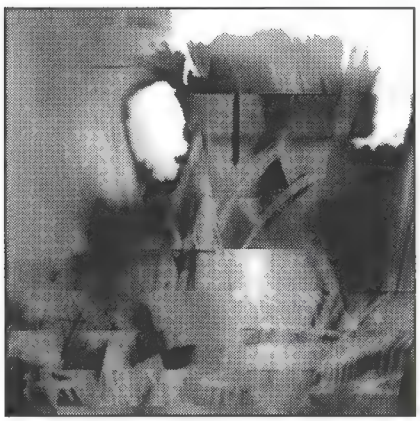

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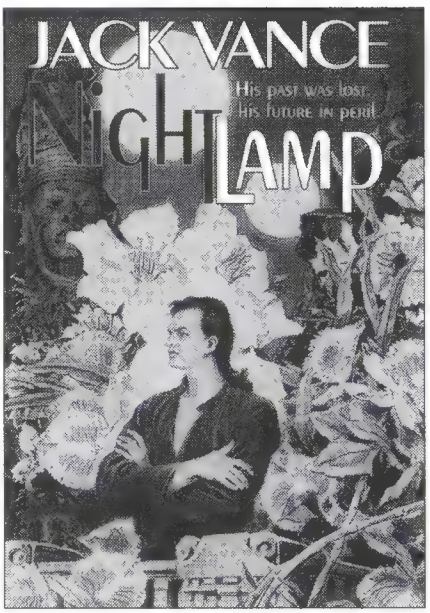
reviews & opinions

Night Lamp
by Jack Vance
Tor, 1996, $23.95
380 pp., ISBN 0-312-85685-7

Reviewed by **Paul Di Filippo**



Simply to announce that Jack Vance has a new novel out should be enough to send you scurrying to your nearest bookstore, cash in hand and Vance's name quivering on your lips. Vance's achievements over the past five decades have been of such consistently high quality that his books rank as must-buys, no foreknowledge of subject matter or ostensible genre necessary. Whether his latest offering is mystery, fantasy or sf, Vance can be counted on to provide an inimitable reading experience, one which features baroque word-portraits depicting gorgeous scenery, odd cultures and quirky characters, as well as scintillating dialogue, Jacobean plotting and recondite emotional depthcharges.

His latest book, *Night Lamp* is no exception to the above paean. Having said that, I should perhaps end my review right here. But because Vance's books are so uniform in their tone, style and concerns, I think instead that I'll use the latest book as a springboard to mention a few of the things I love about Vance's work.

Right off, one of the minor observations: Jack Vance is Dr. Seuss's visionary brother. Why I've never noticed this before, I can't really say. But in this book the similarities between the two authors were striking. Consider the following descriptions:

> Maihac brought out his froghorn, perhaps the most bizarre item in his collection, since it comprised three dissimilar instruments in one. The horn started with a rectangular brass mouthpiece, fitted to a plench-box sprouting four valves. The valves controlled four tubes which first wound around, then entered, the central brass globe: the so-called "mixing pot". From the side opposite the mouthpiece came a tube which flared out into a flat rectangular sound bell. . . . Above the mouthpiece, a second tube clipped to the nostrils became a screedle flute. . . .

> For weeks volunteers and professionals had decorated the Surcy Pavilion to represent a street in the mythical town Poowaddle. False fronts simulated buildings of unlikely architecture; balconies held lumpy pneumatic buffoons, caparisoned in the traditional Poowaddle costume: tall crooked hats with wide brims supporting burbling baluk birds and brass-footed squeakers; loose pantaloons, enormous shoes with up-curling toes. . . .

> The Swamps along the fringes of the desert and beside the river seethed with life. Balls of tangled white worms, prancing web-footed andromorphs with green gills and eyes at the end of long-jointed arms, starfish-like pentapods tip-toeing on limbs twenty feet long; creatures all maw and tail; wallowing hulks of cartilage with pink ribbed undersides.

If you can't instantly envision all these paragraphs translated into Seussly drawings, you need a refresher course in the alphabet of "on beyond zebra". Linguistically and visually, both Vance and Seuss delight in the garishly oddball. If Vance gets to accentuate the darker aspects of his vision, that's only because he's writing novels for adults, not kids' books. (Although Seuss has his dark side too!)

Two of the most favored character types in the Vance Repertory Troupe occupy

center stage in *Night Lamp.* (The title, by the way, naming a sun on whose lone habitable planet certain crises occur, is not explicated until well past the halfway point of the novel, consistent with Vance's gradual unveiling of his plot's mysteries.) The first figure is that of the boy who survives against all odds—bearing a strange destiny involving revenge—and matures into a highly competent young man. As I recall, the best previous example of this theme in Vance was *Emphyrio* (1969). Here the lad is named Jaro Fath, orphan with missing memory and odd voices ringing in his head.

The second figure is that of the fey, willful, enticing girl-woman. Frequently she is evil, just as frequently good. There's one of each in *Night Lamp:* Lyssell Bynnoc and Skirlet Hutsenreiter. The former is not a full-fledged villainess, such as we saw in Vance's latest sequence beginning with *Araminta Station* (1987), more a self-centered amoralist. But the latter is as charming a love-interest as any Vance has yet conjured, a figure with affinities to Nabokov's beloved nymphets.

With these two youngsters bearing the major weight of events, Vance spins out an elaborate tale of treachery, decadence, social climbing and the satisfaction of obtaining justice long delayed. Echoing his classic *The Dragon Masters* (1963) at one point, the story jumps between two major locales: the planets Thanet and Fader, the latter Night Lamp's satellite. The action spans two decades, giving the tale—whose twists and turns it would be unfair to divulge, although the dustjacket copy discloses a major turning point that should have come as a surprise—a rich sense of history. (A similar editorial lapse in this volume lists one of Vance's previous books as *To Love Forever,* not *To Live Forever,* creating an apocryphal novel I wish existed!)

Another of Vance's prime concerns shines thorough in this book: the notion of delusional systems. In the largest sense of the label, any kind of society represents for Vance a consensual folly. But he makes a crucial distinction between those delusions that *work,* that are sustainable and generally beneficial, and those that are inherently primed for failure, predatory, destructive of their holders and those around them. The society on Thanet, with its stratification into "ledges of comporture" is a working system that generally promotes harmony and order (although Jaro the rebel runs afoul of it right from childhood). However, such malignant societies as that of Ushant (where "tamsour" rules) and Fader (where "rashudo" is the ideal) prove the danger of attempting to force life into artificial molds. In the concluding chapters of the book, Vance concentrates this warning down into the portrait of a single man with a unique, prison-bred philosophy and code of conduct, who is totally unable to adjust to freedom.

Always contrasting mankind's petty lusts and ultimately insignificant actions, our short lifespans and limited mentalities, against the vaster background of an infinite, infinitely rich universe, Jack Vance simultaneously upholds the sanctity of human life, proposing that our best impulses and emotions are the only reliable measures and guides in a treacherous cosmos. ◘

Lives of the Monster Dogs

by Kirsten Bakis
Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1997, $23.00
291 pp., ISBN 0-374-18987-0

Sirius: A Fantasy of Love and Discord

by Olaf Stapledon
Available as: **Odd John and Sirius**
Dover Publications, $8.95
309 pp., ISBN 0-486-21133-9

Reviewed by **Stefan Jones**

Both science fiction and fantasy are rife with cats: Talking cats, supernaturally endowed cats, telepathic cats, and cat-like aliens. I've owned my share of domestic felines; they are practical and affectionate pets. But the sentimental preciousness that suffuses cat stories and cat fan art and cat conversations makes me feel itchy. I've learned to keep these opinions to myself, because the sf field seems dominated by militant Cat People, a sect notorious for its humorless fanaticism.

The two speculative novels described below are about sapient dogs, and appropriately enough they are not genre science fiction. Both owe more to Dr. Moreau than Doc Smith. Neither has the sticky veneer of wish fulfillment that clings to most "talking animal" fantasies. One is the first work of a young author for whom pulp is probably an unknown element. The other is one of the last novels of a man of prodigious imagination whose name is almost forgotten by today's sf readers.

Lives of the Monster Dogs is not labeled or marketed as science fiction, probably the result of a wise suggestion by the author's agent. As a mainstream novel *Monster Dogs* garnered a full-page review in the *New York Times Review of Books.* As sf it would have been lucky to earn a paragraph or two in Gerald Jonas's occasional science fiction column.

The bulk of the novel is narrated by Cleo Pira, describing a decade after the fact the arrival in Manhattan of the latest in a long series of dispossessed ethnics: A hundred-odd intelligent canines, dressed in 19th century formal wear and walking upright with the aid of canes. After cashing in a fortune in gold and gems they assume the role of an exiled aristocracy. While most of the monster dogs hole up in the Plaza Hotel, a few try to live on their own. None seem eager to mix with humanity.

Cleo, at the time a struggling history student, becomes a confidant of one of the rogue dogs: The atypically scholarly Ludwig von Sacher. von Sacher, a german shepherd, is struck by her resemblance to the mother of Augustus Rank, the coke-snorting Prussian vivisectionist who conceived of the creatures over a hundred years earlier. Cleo meets other monster dogs, and is hired as their literary spin doctor.

Bakis's dogs are interestingly freakish creatures. They owe their sapience and increased life span to a mysterious process inflicted on them shortly after birth. Their voice

boxes and hands are artificial, designed and implanted by Augustus Rank's modern-day followers.

Still, Augustus Rank is the real prize of the book. We learn about him through his own journals and von Sacher's commentary. Cut off from normal society by a speech defect, he becomes a creepy arch-nerd obsessed with creating monsters of his own, through vivisection. His first attempt at chimeragenesis, transplanting a sparrow's wings onto a mouse, is a failure, but with time he becomes a skilled self-taught surgeon. His talent is recognized after being caught swapping the front legs of a cow, and is sent of the University of Basel to study surgery.

After failing to woo his mentor's daughter, and murdering his half- brother, Rank becomes even more alienated a wacko. Obsessed with the idea of creating an army of selfless dog soldiers, he approaches the future Kaiser Wilhelm and obtains his patronage. When years of work in an underground compound yield nothing, the cocaine-addled Rank and his band of researchers flee to the Canadian wilderness, where they found the isolationist community of Rankstadt and continue their work. While Rank does not live to see his dream fulfilled, his memory inspires his followers through the decades necessary to complete the project. Rank's spirit also inspires Mops Hacker, the homely and despised monster dog who leads his people against their arrogant masters. The tale of the revolt is recounted in an opera put on by the dogs for the edification of Manhattan's culture lovers. Bakis thoughtfully provides the entire libretto.

Of the one hundred and fifty dogs, only three seem to have anything to say: A fatalistic samoyed named Lydia; Klaue Lutz, secretary of the Society of Dogs and a bit of an obsessive; and the philosophical Ludwig von Sacher. The latter reveals the most about the dogs' condition:

> So I have no real culture. I am a monster. There are others whom I could be with, but I don't want to be. We're doomed—but they don't see that. Since we rebelled against the people of Rankstadt and came here, we have lost everything. I have found other problems, beyond the fact that we do not fit in with the humans. Moral problems, which may seem abstract or irrelevant to most people, such as: What is our purpose? If we no longer serve the followers of Rank, what are we here for? To me this is an immediate and urgent question.

von Sacher is also obsessed with Augustus Rank's mother, Maria, although what she represents to him is never made entirely clear. von Sacher's Rankology also seems to intrigue Klaue Lutz, although this worthy's primary obsession is the creation of Neuhundstein, a recreation of a German fairy-tale castle Neuschwanstein.

After expending great literary effort bringing the monster dogs to life, Bakis sets up their destruction. Like Frankenstein's monster, they seemed to have been created to prove a point, and then get out of the way. Cleo, caught up in the tragedy, throws in her lot with the dogs. Even anguished and impassioned love letters by an ailing von Sacher fail to dreaw her away from the dogs' final revels.

As mainstream attempts at science fiction go, *Lives of the Monster Dogs* is remarkable. It is a lively, entertaining, and occasionally moving story, worth reading if only for the account of Augustus Rank's education and obsessions. I could leave it at that, but *Lives of the Monster Dogs* tackles virtually the same subject as a novel written over fifty years ago by one of the most formidable authors of speculative fiction.

Olaf Stapledon (1886–1950) is best known for two novel-length future histories, *Last and First Men* and *Star Maker.* These described the rise and fall of civilizations, both human and alien, over the course of literally billions of years. Individuals barely have a role in these sprawling epics.

Sirius, by contrast, has actual characters and dialogue. While Stapledon's prose is not as polished as Bakis's, the book movingly describes the trials of Sirius, an intelligent dog created by Cambridge biologist Thomas Trelone.

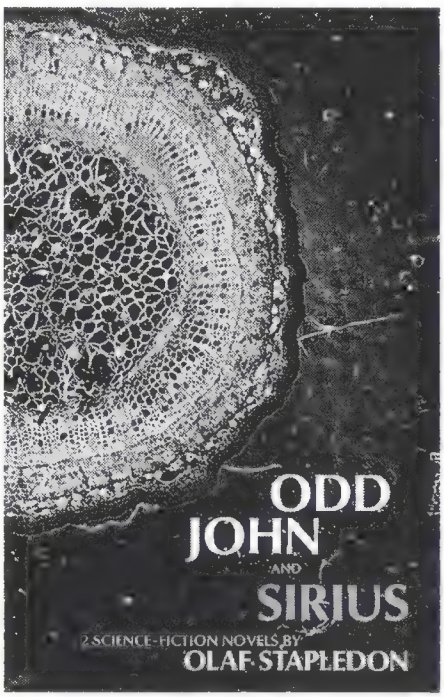
Sirius is genetically an ordinary dog; specifically, a german shepherd with a bit of border collie. Like the monster dogs, the size of his brain was increased artificially. In the case of Sirius, Trelone uses hormones to increase both the size and density of the animal's brain in utero. Stapledon describes the process, along with many false starts and disastrous early efforts, convincingly and in great detail. (Would a merely larger brain endow a dog with language and self-awareness? If humans owe their grammar to "deep structures" in the brain, then this is doubtful. But this detail is easy to forgive in a work written decades before MRIs and Oliver Sacks's books.)

Sirius's sapience takes Trelone, who was merely trying to create a superior sheep dog, somewhat by surprise. When he realizes the degree of his success, the biologist moves his family to North Wales and raises the animal as a human child. The super dog shares the nursery with Trelone's infant daughter, Plaxy. The pair discover the world together, becoming friends despite their physical and sensory differences.

Bakis's monster dogs reveal little of themselves. Except for a brief childhood recollection by von Sacher, we don't learn much about their youth and education. Stapledon tells all, describing Sirius's infancy, his frustration at being hand-

less, his exploration of his canine senses, and his adolescent forays among the district's bitches:

> In one respect Sirius found his love affairs miserably unsatisfactory, throughout his life. For the beloved of the hour, however delectable in odour and appearance and in bodily contact, was invariably from his point of view something less than a half-wit. She could not speak, she could not understand his spoken endearments. She could not share the adventures of his wakening mind. And when her heat was over she became devastatingly frigid and unattractive. The fragrance was gone; the moron mentality remained.



Sirius is alienated from humanity as well. Lacking the convenient miracle of an artificial voice box, Sirius is forced to communicate in barely comprehensible grunts and growls, and by letters scrawled with a pen attached to a glove. Outside of his adoptive human family, he is a mere dog, subject to the kicks and curses of Welsh farmers who are not given to fawning over working animals. Reconciling his canine moods and obsessions with a human-style life of the mind further complicates matters for Sirius. Reading H.G. Wells' *Outline of History* or writing a letter is a struggle; chasing and killing rabbits come disturbingly easily.

After his soul-mate Plaxy is sent away to boarding school, Sirius is lent to a neighbor to to learn how to be a sheep dog. Although Farmer Pugh is a decent fellow, Sirius has to conceal his full intelligence from his new master, and must play second fiddle to an ordinary border collie. Unable to read or converse, he dwells on philosophical matters:

> The young dog was now seriously worrying about his future. Sheep-farming was not without interest, now that he was helping Pugh in a more human way; but it was not what he was for. What was he for? Was he for anything? He remembered his desolate impression on the snow-clad moors that the whole world was just a purposeless accident. Now, he somehow could not believe it. Yet the all-wise Thomas said no one was for anything, they just were. Well, what could a unique creature like him, a sheer freak, find to be? How could he discover peace of mind, or spirit?

When his stint as a shepherd is done, Sirius is brought to Cambridge, where he becomes a lab animal and showpiece, paraded before the luminaries of academia by a rather insensitive Trelone. He tours Cambridge and London in the guise of a domestic dog, and finds much lacking in humanity's treatment of itself and animals. A stint as a companion to a crusading priest exposes him to poverty and injustice, and does little to answer his spiritual questions.

Disillusioned with urban humanity, Sirius returns to Wales. At first he is foisted off on another sheep farmer, a cruel man who Sirius ends up killing to avoid being beaten for being insufficiently craven. Trelone helps his creation beat the the rap by blaming the murder on one of his subsapient super sheep dogs. Realizing that Sirius must be more than a servant, he arranges for the dog to become a farmer in his own right, as the de facto head of an ailing Pugh's farm.

Raising sheep proves to be a natural and socially acceptable role for a sapient dog. As his skill and intelligence become known, Sirius earns genuine respect from his neighbors and fellow farmers. Unfortunately, the Second World War, deaths in the family, and an increasingly infirm Mr. Pugh leave Sirius shorthanded. Things turn ugly after Plaxy abandons her teaching position to become her canine stepbrother's assistant. The relationship gives rise to rumors of witchcraft, bestiality, and espionage. The social isolation caused by this ostracism leads to one of these accusations becoming rather less than unfair. Stapledon deals with Sirius and Plaxy's physical relationship—which he suggests are awkward, unsatisfactory, but necessary—so subtly that I did not pick up on it when I first read the book.

Almost inevitably, the affair and Sirius ends tragically. Although it deals with a single creature, *Sirius* is a far more satisfactory, realistic, and moving tragedy than Bakis' novel. There is far more to Sirius, and thus far more at stake, than to the aloof monster dogs.

Stapledon's story is also more rooted in its world—Wales and England in the 1930s and 40s—than *Lives of the Monster Dogs*. Although set in Manhattan in the first decade of the twenty first century, Bakis does little to cultivate a "near future" atmosphere. She shows us a terribly limited slice of the world outside the dogs' circle of acquaintance. What we know about humanity's reaction to the dogs comes from a few articles—from *The New York Times* and *Vanity Fair*—and cursory references to TV specials and movies. I found this rather annoying. What does the Cardinal of New York think of the dogs? How about Jerry Falwell? Or the scientific community, or PETA? Where are the stalkers and kidnappers and pervs and conspiracy freaks?

I wish Bakis had read *Sirius* before tackling *Monster Dogs*. Her rather polite and restrained novel contains the seeds of something far nuttier and fantastic . . . important qualities for a novel in a world where sheep actually do get cloned and computers actually do beat world chess champions. Standing on the shoulders of a giant, emboldened by Stapledon's fearless imagination, she might have been able to tackle new territory instead of daintily tiptoeing around the borders. ◘

Dradin in Love

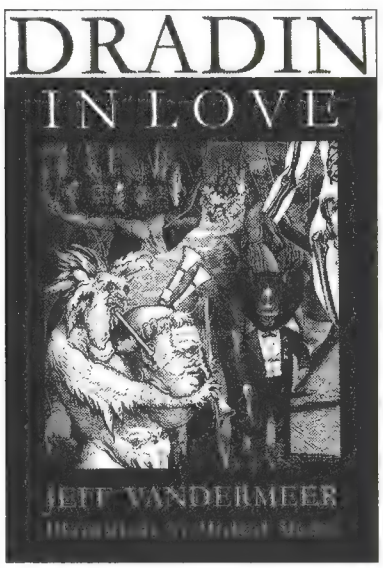
by Jeff VanderMeer
Buzzcity Press, 1996, $9.95
P.O. Box 38190
Tallahassee, FL 32315
98 pp., ISBN 0-9652200-0-1

Reviewed by **The Joey Zone**

There is a school of fictions and half-truths, of prose and poetry, that I hereby dub (if someone hasn't beaten me to it already) "Dark Surrealism". Neither scientifiction nor fantasy, horror nor comedy, this writing is as elegantly designed as the fretwork on a dragonfly's wing and just as elusive to hold in one's hand . . . Poets of prose and otherwise—G. Sutton Breiding, Thomas Wiloch, Misha—all have tenure here, where liquid timepieces still maintain a Persistence of Memory, where is viewed "occidental and accidental, northern and southern baroque and pure jungle styles . . . to look into the revolving spin of a kaleidoscope while heavily intoxicated would not be half so bad".

That last line of advice is from Jeff VanderMeer in his Dark Surreal "travelogue" *Dradin in Love,* which might be his thesis for this school. The location is the city of Ambergris, by the River Moth, and its description is similar to the wanderings of Mervyn Peake's Titus: "On the fringe, jesters pricked and pranced, jugglers plied their trade with babies and knives . . .The life's blood swelled at a more exhilarating pace, a pace that quickened beyond the fringe, where the doughty sailors of the River Moth sailed on . . ."

The author, who among former occupations was a gravedigger and a mushroom picker (I see these as related) supplies fairyland invention at every turn of a corner, such as "the naked boys and girls of the Nimblytod Tribe who swing through the trees and ate birds that became lost in the forest and could not find their way again into the light", and the stealthy mushroom dwellers, lost forever to the darkness and mold . . .



Jeff VanderMeer's writing frequently appears in *The Silver Web* (P.O. Box 38190, Tallahassee, FL, 32315), "A Magazine of the Surreal", which appears to have sown up this corner of literature with its own dark strands. "Nothing this alive, this out of control can be random" and VanderMeer has tossed rare gems into a setting worthy of revisitation, if not a permanent piercing . . . ◘

At the City Limits of Fate

by Michael Bishop
Edgewood Press, 1996, $14.00
P.O. Box 380264
Cambridge, MA 02238
328 pp., ISBN 0-9629066-6-2

Reviewed by **Gene Wolfe**

After the last unfavorable review I wrote I was accused of a hatchet job, one of my accusers being one of the editors of *The New York Review of Science Fiction,* which published my review.

All right, so be it. I have barely met Michael Bishop; on the personal level I neither like nor dislike him, having little reason for either. I have read a good deal of his work and disliked much of it for reasons I will make clear.

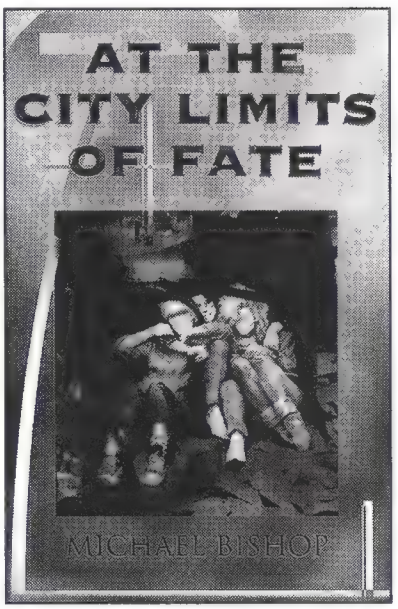
The book under examination here is a thick trade paperback, well typeset on good paper. A quote from H.G. Wells suggests that all its stories are concerned with religion and/or God. That is not quite true, but close enough. Bishop has supplied neither an introduction to the book as a whole nor introductions to the reprinted stories that comprise it. Not all of those stories will be reviewed here—even a hatchet job should avoid repetition.

The book opens with its weakest. "Beginnings" is told from the perspective of the Bad Thief, and microwaves a famous story of a hundred years ago laid in the Civil War. The only thing worth noting about it is how very ill at ease Bishop seems—in this story—in the ancient world. If time is short and you'd like to skip something, this is the one.

The second, "000-00-0000", is interesting. Its premise is impossible from a literary standpoint, but Bishop hits it with everything he's got and comes much closer to pulling it off than I would. In brief, a man who has been given the Social Security Number 00-000-0000 is forced to watch a film about the numeral zero. We are told what he sees on the screen, more or less, and given his reactions to it. We overhear a bodiless voice that is supposed to be that of the film's narrator. It is, in short, a very determined, very perverse effort by a very talented writer to write an actionless story about nothing. It may well be that Bishop writes about nothing better than anyone else in the world. Still . . .

"Snapshots from the Butterfly Plague." Ahhh! Now we're getting to it. Magnificent, though viciously flawed.

Butterflies have learned to live on the juices of recently dead humans and animals, have multiplied exceedingly, and seem determined to succeed where the giant ants failed. It's a great idea stupidly and carelessly handled. The narrator (for example) is implausibly rich at the beginning, more plausibly poor at the end. That is to say, Bishop made him rich by mistake and was too lazy to change it. Frankly, there are a good many things in this story like that. The butterflies have mutated not just once, but again and again and again; and eventually it becomes terribly apparent that these mutations have occurred to make everything as convenient as possible for Bishop.



The worst flaw—and it is God-awful indeed—is right in the middle of the story. The rich-and-poor narrator and his girlfriend, an exotic dancer named Jodi-Marie Wozniki, are crossing America by bicycle so that Jodi-Marie can become a movie star. They stop at a road-side attraction called Moth-O-Rama, whose owner gives them permission to camp on his land. In their little tent Jodi-Marie tells the narrator about a dream she had the night before in which she was strutting down a runway in a costume of live butterflies.

The owner of Moth-O-Rama, who has been eavesdropping outside their tent, interrupts, offering to make her dream come true: if Jodi-Marie will strip for him, he will dress her in his most beautiful moths. The reader chuckles, grins, and rubs his hands, ready for bawdy high comedy; he gets crashing anticlimax instead.

All that is very bad writing, yet the story as a whole is wonderful. It reminds me of Ballard, but is better than any Ballard I have ever read. Why Bishop thought as little of it as he clearly did, yet published it in *Omni* and reprinted it here, I cannot guess.

I said I would show you why I dislike so much Bishop, and I have done so. If you're still in the dark, two more stories should make it apparent. "God's Hour" is an otherwise forgettable little piece about a criminal who is forced, like everyone else in the world, to watch God's TV show on Thursday nights. The story is told from the criminal's viewpoint, and on page 192 we are told "after the program all that you could recall of it was the commercials". On page 193: "He had been shown a vision of hell . . ."

"Allegra's Hand" is a much more ambitious (and worse) piece. In it a school-girl's arm is turning to emerald. That arm is crystalline and even faceted. It is hard and heavy when Bishop finds that convenient; but it is warm and flexible and can move exactly like a normal arm when Bishop finds *that* convenient.

Nor is that all. Allegra's father is a still-youngish Georgia man who fixes air conditioners. For the most part, he talks like this: "It chaps my butt to leave Nate mannin six phone lines for a parley that prolly coulda waited till after-hours, doncha think?" But when Bishop has something somewhat complicated for him to explain, Allegra's father talks like this: "Well, some refused to play. No time. But others said stuff like 'impossible' or 'too weird for rational discourse', then tried to work on it, anyway. None of em can figure what it was jump-started the microscopic block-laying and crystallization process, though. There's no decent treatments either. I'd soon chant over chicken-blood under a full moon than try again the chemo and radiation routes that made Allegra sicker than her slow stonifying ever did."

If you honestly think that a man like Creel Jamison goes around saying "rational discourse", "microscopic block-laying", and "than try again", you should enjoy Bishop much more than I do. (It will also help if you think that such a man, sitting in the presence of his daughter, would talk about her in the past tense.)

In "For Thus Do I Remember Carthage" Saint Augustine's son, whom he has thought dead for forty years, returns from far Cathay to tell him about the wonders its wise men have discovered—galaxies, black holes, and much more. It is a story of a kind far too static and talky for me, but it has never been done better. An intellectual feast.

The title story is what fans call a hoot. I would call it a satire on Japanese influence in America. I seldom like that kind of story, but this one is as good of its type as I have ever seen. Uncomfortably true and very funny.

"Among the Handlers" is the best and strongest story in the book. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a book in which this would not be the strongest and best story.

The Mark Sixteeners take Jesus absolutely literally when he says (in the Sixteenth Chapter of Mark), "They will take up serpents; and if they drink anything deadly, it will by no means hurt them." To prove their faith to God and to one another, they handle rattlesnakes and copperheads. Hoke Pilcher loves Twyla Glanton, and we follow him as he tries to win her by handling poisonous snakes at the meeting, is bitten, visits Hell, and recovers. If only Bishop were a member of some PC group instead of a Southern white male, this story would ensure his literary immortality. As things are, it won't—but it is far better to deserve such immortality and not get it, as Bishop does, than to get it and not deserve it, as so many have.

The brief note following this story should be expunged. I sincerely hope that I have mistaken its intent.

"In the Memory Room", the last story I shall consider, is much shorter but just as good. Her adopted son and various other relations have come to the funeral home to bid farewell to the late Gina Callan. Their hostess is Mrs. Dennis, to whom the silent corpse speaks when the two of them are alone. You could easily read a hundred novels without gaining the wisdom and humanity encapsulated for you here in a dozen pages. If I had my way, this story would be read every year in every Senior English class in every high school in the country.

Joe Mayhew, who reviews much more, and much better, than I do, tells me the basic purpose should be to tell you whether you should get the book. We have reached that point, and I don't know. Are you willing to put up with Bishop's maddening worst in order to read his superb best? You must decide for yourself. If you haven't tried him, this is a good sampling. ◙

HOW I WROTE A SCIENCE FICTION

by **Patrick O'Leary**

1. So I had an idea.

It was 1987. I had just read the wonderful memoirs of a Psychiatrist: Robert Lindner, *The 50 Minute Hour.* One of his case histories involved a scientist who had a delusion that he was The Lord of an Alien Planet. The shrink eventually was able to heal him of his neurosis, which turned out to be a compensation for a extended childhood episode of sexual abuse.

I wondered:

2. What if the man were telling the truth?

3. What if the patient was a woman?

4. Isn't it odd how all these alien abduction scenarios read like variations on the trauma of sexually abused children?

Fueled by this thunderbolt of inspiration I consumed mass quantities of caffeine and nicotine, typed like Kerouac on amphetamines for twelve days straight stopping only for necessities. When I was done I had a five hundred page manuscript. It was—even to my bleary eyes—perfect. I showed it to my wife, Claire. She wept and assured me it was Perfect. I showed it to my novelist friend, Ken. He laughed and said it was Perfect.

Exhausted and enthused, I sent the manuscript to an Editor who called me a week later—laughing and weeping in the middle of the night. He said he wanted to publish it right away. There wouldn't be any editing. I wouldn't have to change a word. Would a $500,000 advance be enough? Would I prefer a hardcover release or paperback? What did I want the cover to look like? Had I started a sequel? Please stop. It would only compromise the integrity of a work that clearly stood on its own. Was I really "Patrick O'Leary" or was this just a pen name? Was it really a true story? Did my father have a wooden leg? Was I a shrink? Was I Catholic? Had I ever been abducted?

He assured me that the book would be in the bookstores in three months—an accelerated schedule, true—but this wasn't just an ordinary novel. This was an Important Work.

It was Perfect.

So there you have it. An idea. A spontaneous outpouring of inspiration. Typing. Acceptance. And success.

Balls.

It actually happened something like this.

Parts 1, 2, 3, and 4 are more or less true.

I actually don't recall when I started *Door Number Three.* I think it was sometime in 1988. I remember writing a page or two in a notebook with a blue felt tip pen. I think it was a variation on this paragraph which appears at the end of Chapter 3.

> So I pretended to believe. They say faith can happen that way: that it is possible to go through the motions of belief and, eventually, some inner transformation takes the soul. I wish it were that simple. Her words entered me deeply and found home in the places within that have no need of logic. But my mind held back, aloof, unconvinced. And in our months together I gave her my ears, my skills, my concern and yes, my love. I shared her anguish, her lonely tragic tale. But as the distance between us grows, and I daily feel the wake of her absence, I sometimes think of her as a character in a book that was never published, a private manuscript abandoned and discarded, never to be shared. Today, I am left holding a mystery so unfathomable that I can only express it in absurd terms. She did not need my help, my belief or even my love. The stakes were much higher than that. She was offering me an option inconceivable: she wanted me to end the world.

Something about the tragic tone appealed to me. I'm Irish. And that bit about the "unpublished" manuscript? Damn, that was touching.

A shrink falls in love with a patient who claims to be an alien.

My friend, Ken Etheridge, said it was very original idea. And he became, for the next seven years or so, my biggest booster. I needed that.

I wrote a draft and sent out a proposal letter. It was rejected by several houses.

Enter David G. Hartwell. David used to be on the editorial staff of a literary magazine called *The Little Magazine.* He published some of my poetry in the early 80s. We corresponded sporadically over several years. One day in 1985 I got a letter from him in an envelope with the Tor logo on it. Tor? As a longtime Science Fiction reader I recognized it as a major sf/fantasy publishing house. Was it possible David worked for them? I checked my worn copy of *Writer's Digest.* Sure enough, he was a Consulting Editor—whatever that was. Maybe he'd be interested in my first novel, a fantasy which I'd been struggling with since 1975. He was. I sent it to him. He read it. And kept me on hold for some two years.

At which time I asked if he was interested in my second novel which I had just finished. It was called at that time, *50 Hours.*

Eventually he rejected both novels. But he made suggestions on both. And I began to work with him.

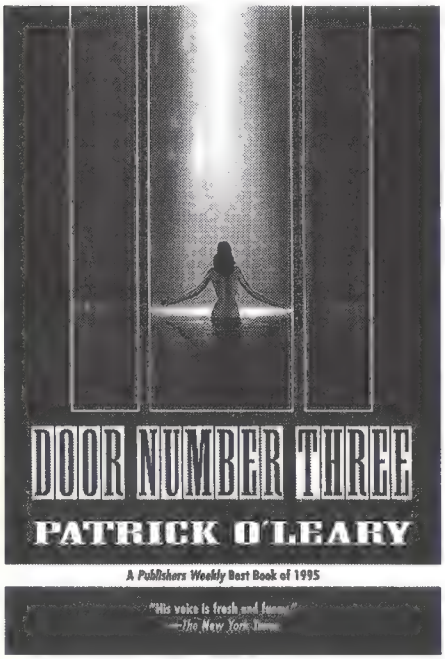
Somewhere along the way I changed the title to *Door Number Three.* I had struggled with the title. Other options were:

Dream Enemy
The Enemy of Dreams
The Dreamer and the Waker
These, as you know, suck.

But I still wonder about the title. Once a month I hear somebody refer to it as *The Third Door.* Even Jim Morrow, one of the kind souls who blurbed it, actually called it that at the 1996 Worldcon in Anaheim. So did Ellen Datlow. Yikes. To this day I fear people across America are going into Barnes and Nobles and asking for *The Third Door*—as my sister-in-law, Estelle, did.

If you know who David G. Hartwell is you will know how incredibly lucky I was to have hooked up with him. David is arguably The Maxwell Perkins of Science fiction. He has had a hand in the publication of some of the most important works in the field for the last 20 years. You think I exaggerate? He was Phillip K. Dick's editor. He is Gene Wolfe's editor. He at one time or another has helped Nancy Kress, Spider Robinson, Lisa Goldstein and Jim Morrow. And many more.

David's editorial input shaped the book in critical and subtle ways. His suggestions bore the authority of his comprehensive knowledge of the genre as well as his academic credentials in literature and his insight into the craft of writing. (For evidence read his *Visions of Wonder.)* Make no mistake: *Door Number Three* would not have become the book it is without his guidance.



Door Number Three
Tor, 1996, $14.95
384 pp., ISBN 0-312-86287-3

He'd jot stuff in the margins like: "Saul Lowe (the midget entrepreneur) has to become a major character. The world of the Holock (the 'aliens') has to be developed. To establish the shrink's credibility you have to research and display his diagnostic methodology. Does the waitress really have to be a psychic? Do you really need that 'Talking Bird'?"

Let me get this out of the way. Imish is my favorite character in the book. He is a red male cardinal. He is not a "Talking Bird". He never was a "Talking Bird". He utters not one single intelligible word in the entire story! He has no speech centers. He is not capable as some birds are of mocking human speech. It is a physiological impossibility. Still reviewers continue to suggest that he is a "Talking Bird". Sheeze. Do I have to spell it out? Folks: Imish is a sentient bird from the future whose intelligence will be nanotically enhanced by being rerouted through his enlarged cerebellum! He will be the last ditch effort by earth scientists to develop a lie detector that can protect them from the mind-lying telepathic aliens The Shing who will invade unsuccessfully in 2033! He communicates by moods, gestures, and scents! He is a lousy typist!

What is so difficult to grasp about that?

Despite The Bird Thing, David's greatest contribution was his uncanny ability to help scope out what a book is trying to become. This is crucial. I find writing to be a process of discovery. I write haphazardly. Out of order. I'll never forget the day when Saul Lowe explained that the Holock were our descendants from the future. I never would have figured that out on my own. The last things I finished on *D#3* were the beginning and the ending. David helped with both. Here's part of the original ending which David excised. I'm glad he did. But still I miss it. It's not every day you get to solve The God Problem.

> There are those who claim The Question of God was answered. But even to the credulous, it was not a wholly satisfying answer, nor was it anything like anyone expected. In fact, it was damn strange—especially the part about tambourines.

So I finished another draft around 1991 and I waited a long time.

One day I was in New York on business and I met David Hartwell and his friend Kathryn Cramer (an accomplished anthologist/editor/writer). We had drinks in Grand Central Station. It was the first time I'd met David and the last time I ever saw him dressed in a color scheme which could be labeled "sane". Visit his homepage and you'll see the method to his haberdashery madness.

Turns out David liked *D#3.* So did Kathryn. I was flying. Real people had read and liked my stuff!

Still there was a noticeable chill at our table. Soon I got the impression that they regarded me as something of an interloper in the genre. It was never said aloud. But I sensed that they both respected and suspected my "literary" approach to sf. I think this means they thought I could write well but wondered if I was doing it for the wrong reasons: a literary type condescending to the field in order to break into publishing. Something like that.

I mentioned loving Doris Lessing's sf: The Canopus books—Danger Will Robinson! David could barely contain his scorn. "They resemble the work of someone who made a cursory scan of Kurt Vonnegut and thought they understood sf." I was walking on thin ice and I didn't even know it. "I mean, why do you write this stuff, anyway?" David finally asked, peering out from under his very snazzy panama hat. Thank goodness I had consumed a martini. Thank goodness I had no idea how important these people were. I told the simple truth.

"How about because I Love it?" I answered.

And I do. I'd been a closet sf fan for years. Literally no one I knew shared my obsession with this genre. I adored Dick, Lewis, Le Guin, Tolkien, Gaiman, Gibson. I also adored Roth, Fowles, Spark, Greene, Waugh, Barnes, Flaubert, Nabokov, Stoppard and John D. MacDonald. It has never occurred to me to be embarrassed about what moves me. I didn't know what the standards were. And whenever I picked up the whiff of condescension emanating from various academic circles toward sf I figured they were dense and snobby—their loss. And when I examined the tasteless plethora of dragons and spaceships which seemed mandatory for any sf cover, I just figured: this is marketing. It's got nothing to do with the book.

My comment seemed to change the atmosphere around

us. I was one of the gang. Or at least, I was doing this for the right reasons. They gave me useful pointers about *D#3*. And then I told them something. (A little blush recalling this part, but what the hell—Martinis, you know?)

I said: "There is something you should know about me. I am incredibly tenacious. I will work on this book and I will work on it until it is done. And done right. And I promise you. I will not stop."

This is the short and true answer to the question of how I wrote this book: I didn't stop.

Two years and endless rewrites later it was done. *Door Number Three* was finally accepted by David and Tor in the spring of 1994. It appeared in hardcover in the fall of 1995. Some seven and a half years after I wrote that excerpt above.

It's customary in essays of this ilk to try to encapsulate the philosophical and political agendas lurking behind the vehicle of their presentation. The Real Meaning of The Work.

Fuck that shit.

I wanted it to be funny. It's a dicey thing: laughter. You work the jokes for hours alone, like a midnight janitor in a comedy club, vacuuming the stage, rehearsing your punchlines to an empty house, and you simply don't know until years later if it was worth the effort.

Laughter is a gift I consider precious and rare. And it is a quality ignored altogether in the two "mixed" reviews my book received. A critic from *Analog* summarized the Text and gave away all the surprises of the plot. Another in *The New York Review of Science Fiction* did a marvelous job at analyzing the various "Subtexts". Each erred, it seems to me, on opposite sides of the spectrum. One came off as a Hard sf fundamentalist who takes things at face value, the other as a literary/Hard sf skeptic who mistrusts the obvious. Oddly they both came to the same conclusion, and summarized the meaning of *Door Number Three* like this: "If we all just love ourselves and remember all our dreams everything will be hunky dory." Neither mentioned comedy. Do you suppose they didn't find it funny? Or did they think that was merely an extraneous byproduct of the Real Issues?

What were my Intentions? What was I "Up To"? When did I stop beating my meat?

Okay.

I tried to use my studies of Carl Jung and embody them in a way that stripped them of their philosophical/inbred jargon and showed how they operate in the real world. Ideas like Projection, Transference, The Shadow, The Unconscious. In Jung's writings they have a tendency to come off as a Language Poetry: an arbitrary edifice of esoteric mumbo jumbo. As David once said: "In the sf field psychiatry is considered to be on the low rung of the sciences." Did it ever occur to scientists that the instrument they use to evaluate and quantify the universe—the psyche—deserves a little attention? Years of therapy led me to conclude that Jung's concepts are truly profound tools and insights. Unfortunately they can seem remote and theoretical and whimsical and pompous outside the working relationship of client/therapist. On the inside, however, they are remarkably practical and effective. I wanted to dramatize these insights from the inside, as they are put into practice.

I wanted to write about some of the mysteries central to our humanity which we often choose to ignore.

Time. The soup we all swim in. What on earth is Now? Why does Then change every time I recall it? Why did John Lennon write a song that went: "The race is over, you've won" days before his death? In 1966 I double-dated with a girl named "Estelle". She lived on "Hartwell" Street in Detroit. I recall her dinky younger sister, a shy 10-year-old girl with long brown hair peering around the corner of the dining room, giggling. Eleven years later I married her. Her name is "Claire". Have your ever noticed that depressed people have no Now? They fear the future, or they obsess about the past. My wife says: "Look at a digital watch. Then look at an analog watch. The digital one is stuck in Now. On the analog you can see both the past and the future." God, I Love her. After six hours of Transition (Real Pain) my wife was told she was ready to have her baby. "What baby?" she replied. She'd forgotten that was what she was doing. She was stuck in Now. A few years ago my wife and son had to go to Texas. I didn't want them to go. I didn't know why. I felt very uneasy about the whole thing. They went. And my son was attacked by a dog. Bitten on the face. Eighty some stitches. In 1966 I was molested by a priest. I told no one until 1982. The next morning I found the priest's picture in the obituaries. I wrote a poem about it. David Hartwell published it. Chip Delany liked it. Who the hell is Chip Delany? I wondered. I believe we all have stories like this. I believe most of us swallow them. I believe Time is a riddle we think is a given.

Dreams. Which we dismiss or do the injustice of turning into allegory (that cigar is really a horse).

God. And my struggles with it. Another mystery so universal we tend to treat it either as reductionary fans or condescending know-betters.

Lucid Dreams. I've had two of them. They are real.

LA. The preferred drug of America. I've been there. It isn't real.

I wanted to write a story that would critique reality.

If *Door Number Three* is about anything it's about the things we take for granted. The alternatives we don't consider.

Like laughter.

Here's the truth about How I Wrote a Science Fiction.

In 1981 I wrote an unpublished short story about a car salesman who falls in love with a nun. His name was Hogan. I fell in love with him. I missed him when I was done. Imagine my surprise when, years later, I discovered he had a brother named John, a shrink who had fallen in love with an alien.

Sometime after David Hartwell had bought my manuscript I visited him in his Tor offices in the Flat Iron Building—Manhattan's first skyscraper. David walked me through the ungodly crowded hallways and mentioned in passing that he once published a wonderful memoir by a Psychiatrist: *The 50 Minute Hour.*

Those who believe they understand reality are not paying attention. ◘

Blood and Volts

Edison, Tesla, & the Electric Chair
by Th. Metzger
Autonomedia, 1996, $9.95
176 pp., ISBN 1-57027-060-0

Reviewed by **The Joey Zone**

In the darkest region of the political field, the condemned man represents the symmetrical inverted figure of the king.
—Michael Foucoult, Discipline and Punish

There's no lights on the Christmas tree Mother— they're burning Big Louie tonight.
—The Sensational Alex Harvey

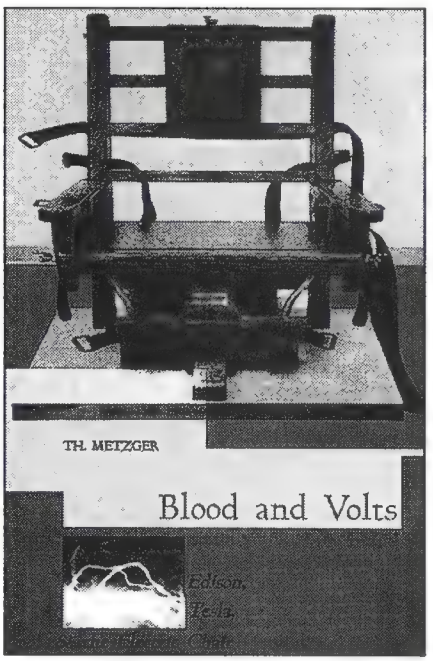
There are only a few things that creep me out. Photos of the Black Dahlia Murder case are one. Watching footage from *The Atomic Café* in 1982 was another. Ethel Rosenberg, supposed commie spy (who looks like my mom, fer chrissakes!) is juiced not once, but two or three times, reducing her and our collective vision of Lady Justice to a flopping flesh puppet.

This book should do the same to the rest of you . . .

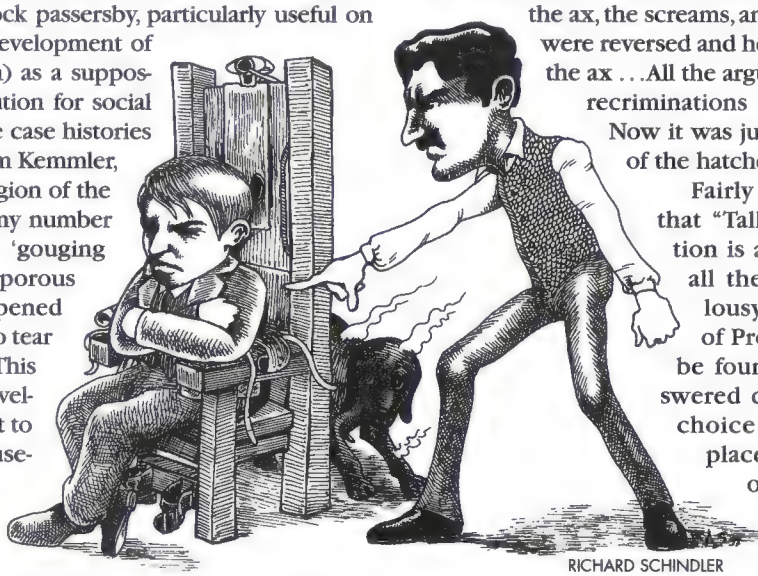
Thom Metzger, literary ranter *(This Is Your Final Warning!),* lead singer of non-MTV darlings, the Rectotem, and befezzed cofounder of the Moorish Orthodox Church with Hakim Bey, insures his status as a true renaissance man with *Blood and Volts,* generating more spuzz individually than the combined last seconds of life on Death Row . . .

"How we see and define ourselves [is] influenced by, crystallized in, this most extreme conjunction of human flesh and electrical energy," states Metzger, who could easily be touting the sizzle of reportage to be found in this volume. "Loud and continuous, the sound of frying bacon filled the room . . ."

The lesson begins with the first use of static electricity for shocking devices—the Leyden Jar (1745) and "a walking stick . . . created that could shock passersby, particularly useful on persistent beggars." The development of "dynamort" (electrocution) as a supposedly more humane resolution for social ills is shown alongside the case histories of Roxie Druze and William Kemmler, as the upper New York region of the 1890s is depicted with "any number of entertainments . . . 'gouging matches' in which stuporous combatants wore sharpened metal thimbles and tried to tear each other's eyes out." This backwater of human development stands on contrast to the shimmering funhouse-mirror of the 1893 Columbian Exposition, placing *Blood and Volts* not only alongside *The Executioner's Song* and Luc Sante's *Lowlife,* but the best of E.L. Doctorow and William Kennedy.



". . . many individuals were beginning to embrace what might be called scientific fundamentalism, substituting the texts of science for those of religion, but retaining the moral and psychological vision that Christianity had promulgated for centuries," says the author about the love affair with new technologies in the 1990s, er, *18*90s . . . "Progress" was demonstrated by the Auburn prison system which provided a "principle of very extensive application to families, schools, academies, colleges, factories, [and] mechanics shops". But what about those who transgress against this New Order? ". . . it can be argued that we as a culture, as a nation, kill those who represent the unacceptable possibility that we might commit the acts that put . . . offenders in prison." Those who "represent the unacceptable", therefore, are not human beings, just "a badly designed element in an electrical current". This is not any different than the view of Nikola Tesla, who developed the theory that all humans are automatons or "meat machines". The proof of this theory is promulgated by the description of William Kennedy's murder of his wife: "He'd given up his will, letting the ax, the screams, and blood control him. The roles were reversed and he was now just an extension of the ax . . . All the arguments were done now, all the recriminations and beer-drenched threats. Now it was just the mechanical rise and fall of the hatchet . . ."


RICHARD SCHINDLER

Fairly early on, Metzger proves that "Talk of humaneness in execution is an act of self-delusion", with all thee botched attempts, all the lousy cooks at the sacrificial grill of Progress. But the real horror to be found in this book is the unanswered question to our own limited choice between bestiality or a place in the Machine—the blood or the volts.

There are only a few things that creep me out. ◙

Nadya: The Wolf Chronicles

by Pat Murphy
Tor, 1997, $6.99
382 pp., ISBN 0-812-55188-5

Reviewed by **Lisa Tuttle**

As soon as I heard about *Nadya* it was a hook I had to read. Not only a new book by the author of *The Falling Woman* (which I loved), but an historical fantasy about a female werewolf on the American frontier. Great idea! I'm not so much interested in werewolves *per se*, but the subject of metamorphoses, particularly women into animals, is dear to my heart. As a reader, I thrilled to what Angela Carter and Suzy McKee Charnas (among others) had made of the werewolf; as a writer, I'd tried my hand in *Panther in Argyll*, a young adult fantasy novel about were-panthers prowling the Scottish Highlands.

Maybe it's not a good idea to come to a book with high expectations. Yes, dear reader, I was disappointed. *Nadya* is not a bad book, and there are things about it which should be praised, yet there are also stretches of lazy and superficial writing, places where the easy option is taken and the most interesting questions ignored. I'm aware that my own interest in the subject makes me biased; I've seen writers before who criticize a book because it is not the book *they* would have written, and I don't want to do that.

Briefly, this is the story of Nadya Rybak, who grows up in frontier Missouri in the 1830s. Her parents—Marietta from France and Dmitri from Poland—are both werewolves who have sought the freedom from human suspicion and fear which pursued them in more populous places. Shortly after puberty and the accompanying monthly Change into a wolf, Nadya feels her first pangs of lust for a neighbour, Rufus Jones. Unfortunately, her human attraction to him draws her as a wolf, and she winds up killing one of his family's sheep. The end result is a wolf-hunt at the next full moon, during which Rufus kills her parents.

As soon as she regains her human skin, Nadya loads a gun and kills Rufus—and then, of course, she has to go on the run. She disguises herself as a man and heads west, where she hopes to be able to live free of fearful humans.

On the Oregon Trail she joins up with Elizabeth Metcalf who, after the death of her father, has been left to push on for a new life in California by herself. They are also joined by the orphaned child Jenny. Elizabeth and Nadya become lovers and, despite Elizabeth's fear of wolves and anything wild, Nadya manages to tell her the truth about herself. In one of the most fascinating sections of the book, they are befriended by a band of Indians who invite Nadya to join them in their dance to the animal spirits. The *hemaneh* (man-woman) Painted Wolf recognizes the wolf spirit in Nadya, although he is puzzled by her lack of awareness of her great power. During the dance, Nadya feels the Change coming over her, in broad daylight. But Elizabeth, horrified by the sight of her lover naked and painted like a savage, pulls her from the dance. Although intrigued by this barely glimpsed possibility that her power might be controlled by something other than just the moon, Nadya "knows" she does not belong with the Indians, and she leaves them. Her love for Elizabeth and the responsibility she feels for both Elizabeth and Jenny makes this inevitable, yet it was disappointing, and I did wonder at Nadya's lack of curiosity, as well as why Elizabeth's desires should win out so easily, particularly when, later, in California, Nadya has no difficulty in cutting lose from Elizabeth instead of accepting the rules of wearing dresses and going to church. Since Elizabeth won't join her, she goes alone up north.

On the Northwest coast Nadya is shot (as a wolf) and found as a wounded, naked woman by the half-Indian Jacob, who recognizes her for what she is. He looks after her and loves her. She loves him in return—this is easy; they are attracted to each other and sexually compatible. She has found her home, her "pack", at last: a small band of outcasts from the white man's society who have all settled in the same area, a couple of former slaves, a Polynesian, some lesbian Indian tricksters . . . Her being a wolf occasionally doesn't matter much—Jacob accepts it as if it were a monthly girls' night out. This, even from a man from another culture, a man in love with wild things, I found hard to believe. Jacob is a dream-lover, Nadya's reward for being true to herself, like the rest of the happy little misfit family she finds waiting for her.

The ending is a confection, the happy conclusion the reader can't help *wanting* for Nadya, whether or not it is believable. Nasty, wolf-and-Injun-hating white settlers turn up and decide they like the place. When various forms of dirty tricks won't shift them, Nadya is finally driven, as a wolf, to kill one of the men. It feels right, and I certainly had no problem with her action as one of self-defense. What I found harder to accept was that it worked, that the white settlers would be scared away by a killer wolf. Far more likely, going by past history—even Nadya's own, in the book—that a campaign of wolf-extermination would have resulted, with wolf-heads on posts all along the site of the future Highway 1.

But, hey, this is just a fantasy . . .

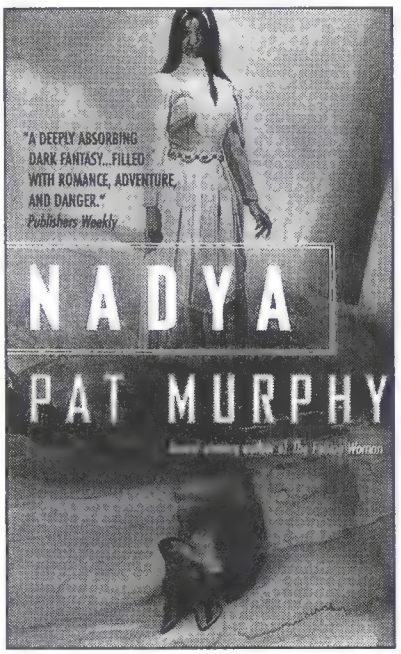
To be fair, the story actually ends shortly after the killing, with Nadya feeling proud of herself and at home; the happy ending of freedom from fear for wolves and other outcasts is implied rather than spelled out. Maybe it was a Butch Cassidy end, after all.

A couple of years ago, reading *So I Am Glad* by A.L. Kennedy, which is about a love affair between a contemporary woman in Glasgow and Cyrano de Bergerac (the real one, the early sf writer, not the character with the nose from Rostand's play) miraculously returned to earth, I caught myself wondering *why* Kennedy had chosen to write about de Bergerac, what point she was making. And then I reflected that if, instead of being a critically-acclaimed mainstream Scottish writer, the author was Connie Willis or Howard Waldrop, I wouldn't ask that question; I'd accept the author's interest in the historical figure as enough. Viewed as fantasy/sf, there was no problem. Later, I was startled to see that nearly all the reviewers found the book slightly baffling and that at least two of them assumed that the heroine was insane, de

Bergerac a fantasy—despite the evidence in the book that other people see and react to the man as a living presence. These reviewers did not read the book on its own terms; they assumed it was a "realistic" novel in which time-travel or reincarnation could only be evidence of madness.

I bring that up, because it came into my mind when I was reading and found myself wondering dimly at some point: why werewolves? And somehow it didn't seem enough to answer: why not werewolves? While Pat Murphy was not obviously "using" the notion of the werewolf to make some allegorical point about anything else, considering the book as a straightforward fantasy also seemed insufficient. Or, perhaps I should say, that as a fantasy novel, it doesn't quite hit the mark.

Nadya is a very carefully limited, *realistic* fantasy. It's closer to a straightforward novel set on the Oregon Trail than anything else. There is no ambiguity about the werewolfism; it is as much a background fact as the historical setting and Nadya's femaleness. And to her it is neither fantastic nor psychologically troubling: as she grew up with it in the context of family life, she doesn't have to agonize over it or question it. But although she is not unique, in the novel she is alone, once her parents die. As a human, she must interact with people; as a wolf she can meet up with (and even mate with) wolves—but there are no other werewolves to bond with or learn from. Her parents somehow found and recognized each other in the huge wild expanse of the New World—but then they only had one child (a peculiarity which is not commented upon, although Nadya is born in the year after their marriage, her mother is neither old nor ill, and Dmitri had six brothers) and Nadya never apparently even considers trying to find other werewolves; there is no suggestion offered as to how rare or common lycanthropy might be. The tantalizing suggestion that her shape-shifting might be open to voluntary control is raised and then whisked away . . . after she has left the Indians, Nadya gives it no more thought—even though to have control over it is something which could clearly save her life; it certainly would have saved her parents if they could have remained in human form during their final moon-rise.



So I wonder again: why werewolves? Why decide to write about werewolves, and then back away from the subject in all its troubling complexity?

Nadya herself is a fine creation, a multi-faceted, interesting, believable character. Murphy writes glowingly well about being a wolf, about Changing, and about becoming human again. The effect it has on Nadya's sexuality and sense of self is particularly good (she can smell other people's sexual arousal and their fear, for example). Yet most of her story would not be substantially different if she only *believed* herself to be a wolf at times, or was an outcast from civilization for a different reason—race or religion or sexual preference.

Murphy decided, probably wisely, and certainly ambitiously, not to stick with one point of view throughout. Although much of the book—which is written in the third person, and an authorial voice occasionally, disconcertingly, breaks into the second person ("You are a woman. You are a wolf. You have found your place . . .")—is from the point of view of a sympathetic major character (Nadya, Elizabeth, Jacob), occasionally an unsympathetic character, like William Cooper, who believes himself called by God to preach and call for the killing of wolves as a Christian duty, is enlisted. One thing I felt this book lacked was any strong image of the wolf as a threat, and presumably the William Cooper vignette is meant to supply that—yet, to me, it fell flat. Perhaps the author had too much sympathy with her wolves to have any left over for those who threatened them. The characters who are frightened of wolves are depicted as crazy, bad, or simply ignorant (like Elizabeth, who doesn't know that wolves will not harm her). This may be a true assessment of humankind's age-old fear of wolves, but to be unable to make the reader feel the ancient, surviving reality of that fear is, I think, to miss out on the very thing that gave the image of the werewolf its original disturbing power.

It is probably easier, and more in tune with the times, these days to write a fantasy of the joys of being a werewolf than to write a convincing horror story on the same subject. Barring the ranchers and other livestock owners who are still threatened in the age-old manner by the existence of wolves, most novel-reading Americans would probably rather fantasize about dancing with wolves than killing them. "The wolf is my brother" is the Indian attitude, and the attitude of this novel, but, *viz.* Cain and Abel, my brother *could* be a murderer. Wolves and humans do have much in common. Certainly humans are a greater threat to wolves than vice versa, and this has probably been true throughout recorded history. Wolf attacks on humans are rare; it may even be, as I read somewhere, that in North America the only documented attacks have been by domesticated wolves or dog-wolf hybrids rather than by truly wild wolves. Nevertheless, the fear of wolves felt by mankind is very real, and it still exists. Nadya doesn't even seem to fear her own ability to inflict harm, which may be her innocence, but did not strike me as psychologically apt. The werewolf had its origins in horror, and I don't think the notion can be transported into feelgood fantasy without a possibly fatal lack of vitality—or even point.

Nadya has a subtitle: "The Wolf Chronicles" which might mean that this is only the beginning of a series. It is possible that some of the opportunities missed, the roads not taken, will be explored in further volumes. I hope so. ◘

The Prestige

by Christopher Priest
Tor, 1997, $14.95
416 pp., ISBN 0-312-85886-8

Reviewed by **David Bischoff**

After writing a short review of this book for another journal and not being particularly happy with it, then struggling for weeks to decide the style and content that should form this review, I had no other choice than to take the personal slant.

The Prestige, after all, was a very personal experience for me. When I was ten years old, I had read some Heinlein and Del Rey juveniles, was a rabid comic book fan but actually preferred the Hardy Boys to Tom Swift. However, one day, in a bookstore near my church with my father, I spotted a book called *Seven Science Fiction Novels* by H.G. Wells. It, of course, was the thick inexpensive Dover Edition. Somewhere I'd heard of Wells and thought this book looked quite interesting and asked my Dad if he'd read it. He hadn't. However, as the following week was my birthday, that Sunday at church the tall gangly bookstore owner with a spectacles-on-a-rope handed me a wrapped package. "Your dad told me to give this to you. Happy Birthday!"

I unwrapped it. It was *Seven SF Novels* by H.G. Wells. I started reading *The Time Machine* in the car on the way home. A few days later, when the last word of *Island of Doctor Moreau* was inhaled, I emerged from my visionary trance a changed boy.

I read *The Prestige* in England. A week later, I happened to be speaking to Kim Newman in a pub near Bloomsbury and mentioned that I'd had the most amazing experience with *The Prestige.* He nodded and gave a three word review that would probably do in a pinch.

"A gripping novel."

Gripping. Yes. But in the year since I read the book, it keeps coming back to me, haunting me. I found when it was time to reread the book for my review I was reluctant. It was kind of like getting on the world's most amazing roller-coaster ride in the world, and then asked to take it again when the intensity of the ride had been almost too great to bear.

I met Christopher Priest in London in 1984. Of course, like any well-read science fiction sort, I was familiar with his work. I found him charming, affable and one of the more approachable Brits I'd encountered. Is *this* the frightful Chris Priest, I thought, whose reputation amongst sf writers goes back to fannish roots, but whose stories and books transcend all that nonsense? Well, yes it was.

He was then basking the success of the remarkable novel *The Glamour* which along with his other books had earned him *The Guardian's* nomination as one of the Best Young Novelists in England. Not "sf" novelists, mind you. When the British speak of novelists, they mean "literary novelists".

Priest was also doing a sideline agenting business at the time. William Gibson was a client.

Life was good.

Thirteen years and only two books later (and no longer agenting Gibson, alas) I saw Chris at the Glasgow convention. He was living in Hastings with wife Leigh Kennedy and his five year old twins. He made no bones about his financial situation. Not great. His publisher paid for his trip to Scotland to promote the new book. But he was smiling and happy and all he could talk about was his kids. He invited me down to visit him on the South Coast of England.

I told him that since his books had cost me so little in the past, I could splurge and buy his new one. "That's too kind. Do me a favor though . . . could you buy one from the *Andromeda* booth?"

I picked out *The Prestige* from the stacks and presented it to owner. His eyes lit up with true enthusiasm. "Good choice!" he said, happily taking my VISA.

I was living in Cambridge for a few months that year with my girlfriend. I started *The Prestige* on the train on the way home.

After I devoured the last haunting words, again I was a changed boy.

"The trouble with you Yanks," a Brit writer and editor friend once brayed at me, after I'd been a bit hurt at something he'd said, "is that you've no sense of irony!" His pub pint of best bitter teetered drunkenly in his hand.

Well, not wholly true. Americans just aren't much good at the subtleties of irony, or the vast possibilities of verbal shufflings and prestidigitations and nuances enjoyed by the rich language inheritance of the British. Thus, with their verbal skills, they get away with bloody murder—and can also dazzle with intricate displays of lingual pyrotechnics.

A reader need but compare Sunday papers here and the broadsheet Sunday papers there. I would spend hours each week in England reading the papers, thoroughly immersing myself in erudition, knowledge and well-informed opinion framed with wit and style.

Alas, British novels often lack certain essential emotional bluntness and thematic honesty that Americans find as strong points.

The Prestige is combination of both.

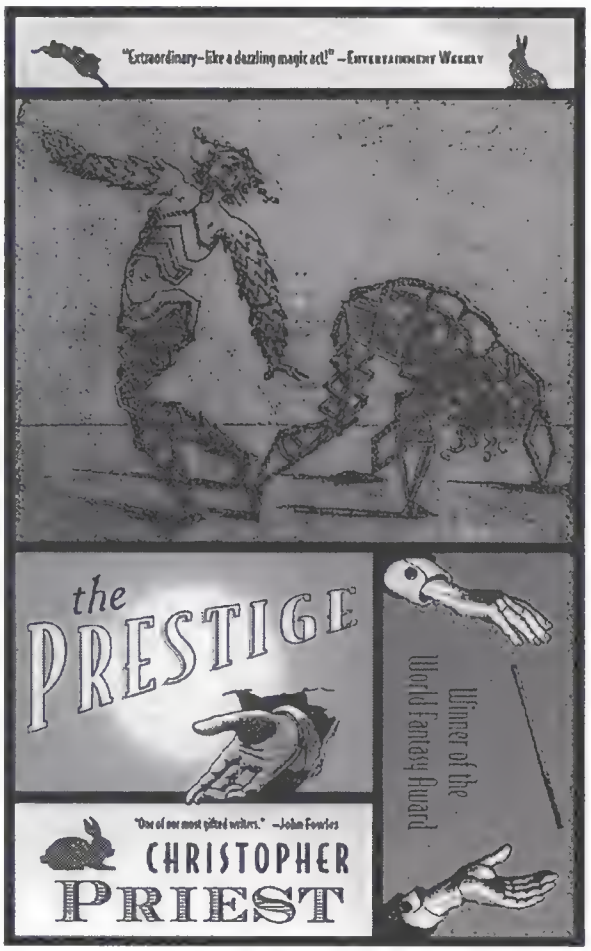
Christopher Priest has experimented before with "the unreliable narrator" literary device, notably in *The Quiet Woman,* but never to as good an effect.

The Prestige is all related in first person, however in different first person formats. It opens in the present day with the narration of Andrew Westley, a character who is uncovering secrets of his past, notably his relationship to two stage magicians of the Victorian and Edwardian eras. The writing here is remarkably candid, although still Wellsian in tone, with convincing emotional grounding . . . and a genuinely compelling mystery to be solved: Westley empathically senses he has a twin, whom he has never met.

The secret, it seems, lie in the journals of the two magicians.

The first journal belongs to Alfred Borden, and it is here, through the window of the convincingly contempo-

rary background and set up that the actual plot begins. The writing here is remarkably vivid and real. Priest's gifts allow him to write in the exact style of a talented Victorian writer. The remarkable effect is that, though the plot unfurls with leisure, it is remarkably arresting. I remembered the works of Daniel Defoe as I read these journals—Defoe, of course, being the first master of the novel of verisimilitude, before readers were aware of the conceits employed in written fiction. Borden, though arrogant and ambitious, also is human and sympathetic. The reader is drawn into the secrets behind the tricks of the Victorian stage magician—and world they occupied with such vividness that Priest's own literary tricks and setups are noticed, if at all, only subliminally.



The next section is contemporary again, related by Kate Angier in a markedly different voice, setting down some of the facts of Westley's murky past, and preparing the reader for the next plunge into the past. Again, journals are presented, this time of Rupert Angier, the arch rival of Alfred Borden. The novel is centered on the intense competition between the two for the most wonderful illusion in the world. Unable to figure out exactly how Borden accomplishes the trick called The New Transported Man, desperately driven to outdo him, Angier travels to America to seek the aid of that odd genius of electricity, Nicola Tesla.

To divulge more would to spoil the delight and strangeness of this section. Stunned, I kept reading and thinking, this is the sort of book that might have been written as science fiction if there had never been a plunge into pulpdom and exploitation of the genre. This is the sort of book that the young H.G. Wells might write if he were alive today, and had more literary devices in his toolbox!

Finally, after a spell of what a London reviewer best called "feverish imagination", we read Westley's final passages and discover the devastating effect that the rivalry has had on their descendants, themselves and—on reflection—the world.

The last page is particularly haunting with a resonance that informs the book with yet another dimension of meaning.

I found myself thinking about it throughout the rest of my stay in Britain.

England is a strange place.

It's about the size of Pennsylvania, but that's like saying that Manhattan is about the size of Catalina.

When I spoke to Chris about making a date to visit him in a month or two, he'd just returned from John Brunner's funeral and feeling tired because the drive had been so long. I could sympathize. I'd just visited Aberistwyth in Wales so my scholar girlfriend could do research in the Welsh National Library. We'd driven there in a small car. After looking at a map I thought . . . "Hey! Wales is not that far away."

Ten hours later, after a wrong turn, on a mountain road after a wrong turn, with bunches of baffled sheep staring down at us through the misty rain with expressions that said, "What are *you* doing here?" I realized how wrong I was.

The English only have a few main arteries of highways. That's good. Preserves countryside and buildings. But if you want to get anywhere fast in England, make sure you live by a motorway and then pray, because the other roads are slow.

We used the other scholar's car to get to Wales, so we had to take a train to Hastings.

Hastings is just far enough away from London to be not be a viable train commute to London. The first thing I noticed when I got off the train was a sign cheerfully saying something like "Welcome to the Home of 1066!" (William the Conqueror and all that, don't you know.) The second thing I noticed was how ratty the train station was.

Hastings is a dreary town filled with crime and drug addicts, only recently experiencing gentrification. "We moved here because it was cheap," declared Chris.

Now, to an American, it wasn't really that bad. Rather like moving to a nice neighborhood in Newark. When Chris told me the house prices I gasped. Even I could afford a house here, I thought. And these were nice Edwardian houses, too! Unfortunately, to a lover of the Pacific Northwest, I'd just as soon live on Mars.

Chris drove us to his townhouse, which was big but in the midst of remodeling. I knew Leigh from the states and so it was immediately comfortable. The twins, Elizabeth and Simon, sparkled with the happiness of loved children.

Chris and I sipped Sainsbury's Ale from small bottles and we talked. Chris had just gotten email from Norman Spinrad

and was a little upset. Norman had expressed relief that Chris had lost the Hugo award for Best Non-Fiction for *The Book on the Edge of Forever.* (By one vote, by the way.) Apparently Harlan Ellison had made Norman promise that he'd run up on the platform if Chris won and punch him out.

Frankly, having read *The Book on the Edge of Forever,* and finding it brilliant and witty but sadly petty (Nyah, nyah, Hemingway . . . Let's dissect *Islands in the Stream,* shall we!) I was glad that the sf equivalent of the Miss America Pageant hadn't been reduced to World Wide Wrestling level. Mostly though I was thrilled! It was all rather titillating . . . like sitting in the room with a relieved Gore Vidal having ducked a drunken swing from Norman Mailer.

Christopher Priest is remarkably candid in conversation and seemed honestly happy to have us visiting. Apparently Hastings is far away from most other places. Even bustling literary London is distant. ('You move away from there, you just drop off the map!' said Chris.) I was touched by the sadness and regret he spoke of in the breach of his friendship with Brian Aldiss, particularly since it was because of Chris that I had gotten to meet and speak with Aldiss.

I expressed dismay that he didn't write more. He looked at me with very sad eyes and shook his head. "It's hard, Dave. It's very hard."

Then we got to happier matters. We gossiped and laughed, had a very nice chicken dinner (why is chicken *so* much better in Britain?) and talked about Chris' obsession, the Beatles. Chris had actually met the Fab Four in the Liverpool days and had seen them at The Cavern, and was happy to recount the story with the style of an excellent raconteur telling a well rehearsed memory over coffee and cigars. The next day he put the then just released *Beatles Anthology* and the kids frolicked about to "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" and "Love Me Do".

I wanted to speak about *The Prestige* and Chris had no problem with that at all. For a man who has a hard time writing his novels, he certainly has no difficulty in discussing them.

The Prestige has its roots in Chris' fascination with stage magic and stage magicians. His involvement in the alt.magic group on the internet was a vital catalyst . . . and help in conception and composition. He spoke of awe for the work of Harry Houdini in the past and of Ricky Jay and The Amazing Randi. We talked about Jay's book *Learned Pigs and Fireproof Women,* a book which inspired an outline for the third collaboration between Charles Sheffield and myself . . . A book, alas, not yet written.

Chris pulled out some tapes of David Copperfield's TV shows and we laughed and joked about Copperfield . . . but Chris actually pointed out that he admired that magician and felt that other magicians maligned him too much. "You know," he said, his voice not untouched by irony. "The world of magic is all too much like the world of writers. All too much envy and back-biting."

I didn't say anything, since this really wasn't an interview but that struck me that after all this *Book on the Edge of Forever* business, the irony was indeed so thick in the atmosphere I needed that proverbial knife to cut it so I could get some fresh air!

However, that professional jealousy is the precise core of *The Prestige.* It is a book about two brilliant, troubled, proud men unable to get leering monkeys of jealousy and identity crises and poor self esteem off their backs—and how it ruins future generations. The resonance of this book is startling and this is why it haunts me.

Every great book's true value lies in what it doesn't actually say in black and white. Can you remember an actual paragraph of *David Copperfield* or of *For Whom the Bell Tolls?* A great book creates an entirely new entity that lives in the reader's heart for the rest of his life and transforms the way he sees the world.

If I were nailed down by the need to answer an English College Class question on this amazing novel (and I have no doubt that this will be a text that will be studied so in the future) I would have to say: *"The Prestige* makes us see how the sins of the past affect our reality; and gives us compassion and pity for the sinners."

The next day, we drove out to a nearby medieval castle, a keep constructed to guard against French invasion. Again, the English roadways struck. We had to get out of the car so that Martha recover from car sickness they induced.

We strode around in awhile in the mammoth keeps and turrets of the past. Young Simon refused to climb the twisting stairway, while Elizabeth strode up and stood by windows so fearlessly that I was frightened. Martha, a medievalist presently immersed in the study of the metaphorical implication of excrement in the Middle Ages, happily pointed out the stone loos.

Chris drove us to a more convenient station in the late afternoon. "Sometimes, these trains screw up. So if you get stuck up the road, do not hesitate to call for help."

Charles Dickens said once that he didn't write book reviews because "I'd rather have friends." I guess that's why I generally don't do it.

I wanted to tell people about this book, but I was sad because there's so much log rolling in this field (which is in the case also, I understand, in *The New York Times Book Review)* and if a review appeared by me people might say, "Oh he's just honking the horn because he likes Priest."

But the idea of my writing something about *The Prestige* wasn't Christopher Priest's. He later wrote to say that both he and Leigh had enjoyed our visit and how it got kind of lonely sometimes in Hastings. As we'd left, Elizabeth had rushed up and happily presented Martha with a card with a drawing that she'd done for her. Martha couldn't open it for a long time, she was so touched by the genuineness of the gift.

Now, though with the James Tait Black award on Christopher Priest's mantelpiece and other appreciations out there, I feel validated and can speak my mind.

The Prestige is a brilliant novel.

Because of it, I'm not as much of a boy anymore. I have a more adult sense of wonder living in me, a present from Elizabeth Priest's magician father. ◘

Christopher Priest talks to David Langford

Christopher Priest's all too infrequent novels are eagerly awaited by countless readers inside and outside the sf scene. As well as winning or being shortlisted for the usual international sf awards (notably, receiving the 1974 BSFA Award for *Inverted World*), he's also a veteran of the first Best of Young British Novelists promotion; and his book jackets feature enthusiastic comments from John Fowles. To general enthusiasm and popping of champagne corks, the first Priest novel in five years appeared at last in September 1995: *The Prestige*.

Chris is married to fellow-novelist Leigh Kennedy; their twin children's names can be found on the new book's dedication page. These days the family lives in Hastings, so it seemed logical that Chris and I should chat on the seaside promenade under the blinding sunshine of Britain's 1995 heatwave. Is candyfloss bad for cassette recorders? Will the harsh cries of gulls drown out vital answers? Interviews are fraught with unreliability. . . .

A much shortened and differently edited version of this interview and the accompanying material appeared in issue #4 of *SFX* magazine (dated September 1995, published August).

Chris, you're regarded as one of the more "literary" authors working in or near sf, but the editor of *SFX* was morbidly fascinated by your brush with *Doctor Who* and asked specially about this: can you bear to tell the story?

I'll take on almost any writing job, provided it sounds interesting. *Doctor Who* was like that. The programme is a challenge to a writer: a tiny budget, a more or less fixed cast of characters, a fairly inflexible storyline . . . and millions of fans who'll beat the shit out of you if you overlook a crucial fact mentioned in an undertone by a minor character in the second part of a story first transmitted in 1968. . . .

But you still bravely did a script.

I wrote two scripts, not one. The first was while Douglas Adams was script editor, before the *Hitchhiker* books burst on the world. Douglas rang me up one day and said the producer felt the show was drifting away from the heartland of sf, and wanted some "real" sf writers involved. I went in and met Douglas, and he commissioned a four-parter called *Sealed Orders*. I wrote this, and it was accepted but never produced. This was because of upheavals in the show while I was writing. Douglas Adams pissed off to become rich and famous, the producer also moved on, and by the time I delivered my story the "brief" (the background story) had changed.

And what about script number two?

The BBC commissioned a second story called *The Enemy Within*, because of the first going wrong. Again it was written and paid for, but once again upheavals in the BBC wreaked havoc. They inflicted a total of three different script editors on me, who all mucked around with the story and demanded different things . . . and the new producer turned out to be an appalling little *[word obscured by microphone noise, and triumphant seagull cries]*, who was more interested in being a media star than actually working with a lowly writer like me. It all led inevitably to a bust-up. I grabbed a parachute and took a header through the nearest emergency hatch.

Have you done much other TV/radio work?

In theory I'm currently writing a three-part sf/thriller original for BBC-TV called *The Cull*, based on the Hungerford massacre. I actually passed through Hungerford on the day of the shooting! Now the script is languishing somewhere in the Beeb and the contract is about to lapse.

I did an episode of *Return to the Labyrinth* for HTV, and Thames TV did one of my stories, *The Watched*, as a 30-minute play. A couple of years ago I dramatized *The Glamour* as a play for BBC Radio 4. At present most of my later novels are under option for movies, of varying likelihood.

People say my books are visual, but of course I think of them as novels, not first drafts for screenplays.

I read in that terrible scandal-sheet *Ansible* (cough, cough) that you were in the studio for the recording of *The Glamour* and were pretty impressed. . . .

Yes. The studio was purpose-built for radio drama, and was almost new. It was a surreal place . . . built to allow just about every conceivable aural circumstance. One bit was carpeted, another had bare boards, another flagstones, another gravel, etc. The staircase linking the two levels has three "strips": bare wood for institutions, carpet for houses and stone for dungeons. There are numerous different doors to be slammed, opened, rattled, locked. There's a phone-box in one corner, and even a car. I poked around, trying to imagine what someone would think were they to wake up in the room without knowing what it was used for!

What was the recording process like?

I assumed radio plays were recorded with a group of actors holding scripts and standing around one microphone. "Ahem!" they said as they ticked me off. "Only *The Archers* is done like that!"

The way my lot did it was almost like a stage play. The fight scene was meticulously rehearsed, with all the punches and *oof* noises arranged so they were close to microphones: several takes, with much falling over and bruising.

Bed scenes are recorded in a bed (which folds out of the wall), with sheets! "God, if I'd known this," I said, "I'd have put in a scene in a swimming pool." The sound man visibly paled. "We don't like swimming pool scenes. . . ."

An authentic broadcasting secret! I'd never have guessed.

Nor do they like scenes in cars: too many familiar noises that change all the time—gears, traffic, etc.—and which have to be timed to the script. They still cut cabbages in half for beheadings ("not much call for that these days"), but I saw no coconut shells anywhere. The sound of a ring-pull beer can defies aural science: they had to go down to the vending machine and buy a few cans of Coke.

A highlight was listening to the effects people build up a car bomb from scratch, beginning with a dynamite explosion (sounded a bit like a door slamming), then layers added to give echo, reverberation, glass shattering, metal lumps skidding down the road, ground juddering, windows rattling, people screaming, alarm bells going. When this was played to the actors, two of them ducked—I too jumped out of my skin, and I knew it was coming! The BBC people were so pleased with it that they put it into the effects library. Me: "Here, that's *my* car bomb!" They: "Sorry, squire, it's ours now."

I was awed by the manifest professionalism and hard work of it all; felt shagged out at the end, and I was just watching.

Radio lets listeners create their own mental pictures—but often the elements of a book that translate well to film or TV aren't the important ones. From your own novels, do you have favourite visual images? Would they translate?

There's a scene in *The Glamour* where the two main characters are driving along, and one of them suddenly realizes that a third person is sitting in the car with them, who must have been there unnoticed for several days. This is a fairly crucial scene and it works "visually", but I can't imagine how anyone could actually point a camera at it and film it. There's another scene in which a woman is raped by an invisible man, the point of which would presumably defy a camera. (But film-making isn't my game . . . so maybe there's a way.)

I remember a hair-raising surprise on similar lines to that "third person" discovery, in *The Affirmation*.

The Affirmation has several similar scenes. There's one with a particular room painted white, and another with a manuscript that the central character has written. Many people have found these scenes surprising, not to say shocking, because of the visual jolts they contain. But they aren't the same kind of jolt you get from a horror movie, where something leaps out unexpectedly and scares the shit out of you. My shocks are based on a sudden devastating reversal of what the reader knows or believes.

Let's call it the "Priest effect". When did you first consciously do it?

I think it was when I was coming up to the end of the first draft of *The Space Machine*. There's a character called "Mr. Wells". At first, I planned him to be H.G. Wells, the real-life author. He never felt right, though, and the book started to unravel. Then I suddenly realized that it made more sense to think of him as the unnamed first-person narrator of *The Time Machine* and *The War of the Worlds* . . . a fictional character, but with many of the characteristics of the author. This kicked the novel into a completely new arena, and I saw the story in a more subtle light. It made it less "reliable": it was still a scientific romance in the Wellsian mould, but it was now in quotation marks; it was not just a re-creation or a pastiche, but a contemporary novel set in a metafictional past. This sounds as if I was tarting it up, but in reality it opened up more possibilities for jokes, plot development and character insights, so I think it made the novel more enjoyable.

After that, things were never quite the same. I can no longer take a plot seriously enough to go with it as bare plot. I'm always thinking: where's the flaw in this, where does the idea leak? Unreliability soon starts creeping in, and I cheer up no end.

But that subdued mischief in *The Space Machine* was something an inattentive reader could overlook. It's the unmistakable shocks in *The Affirmation* that make this your narrative breakthrough novel.

Yes, the first really noticeable "Priest effect" is there. This is a key novel of mine, if anyone wants to work out where I stand in relation to the rest of sf.

Looking through your older stuff, I found traces of the "effect" as far back as 1972—in the short "Real-Time World". Had the germ of it been with you even longer?

The first time I remember being jolted by this was in Fredric Brown's sf novel *Project Jupiter*. Something of the sort happens there, and it left an impression on me. But I think I first noticed this narrative unreliability lark back in my teens, when I was still reading horror stories. I was fascinated by writers like Lovecraft, whose narrators famously go on scribbling even as the horrid thing is slithering up the garden path towards them. I kept trying to imagine this. What would I do if that happened to me? Sitting in my study, trying to set down an account of the horrible events of the afternoon . . . and blimey! It's out there again! And this time it's coming for me! Would I go on scribbling? Clearly not . . . so then who finished the story? The problem used to worry me for hours!

Like that dreaded English Composition subject: "The Hunt, told from the viewpoint of the quarry. (Remember the quarry must escape in order to tell the story.)" Guaranteed to set any red-blooded schoolkid searching for a loophole in the "must escape" rule. . . . Although the sf audience is used to writers kicking holes in relativity or thermodynamics, don't you get protests when you tinker with the narrative itself?

Actually, it's a bit mixed. On the whole, the answer is no: sf readers seem sympathetic to the books themselves, although they don't always like what I *say* I'm trying to do with them.

I get pretty perceptive reviews from sf critics, while out in the wider world it's more patchy. The newspaper reviews are often bemused, and give their own game away: few of these critics have the foggiest idea what I've been up to for the last twenty-five years. The sf world is more actively tuned in to what writers like me are doing.

Inverted World seemed to go down particularly well with the "straight" sf audience, receiving a BSFA award, Hugo shortlisting and so on. Do you remember what set you thinking about that weird, literally infinite world?

(Long worried silence.) This goes back a long way . . . the middle 1960s, I think. I was wondering about time travel in a topographical sense: a movement to and fro across a certain place that would put you forward and back in time. I remember not getting anywhere with it for ages back then, but that's where the city on rails eventually came from.

Didn't time travel by moving to and fro across a special bridge emerge separately in your story "Palely Loitering"?

Yes. You can't stamp out an idea once it's taken hold!

And how did it connect with the notion of the hyperboloid world?

That came from something I learnt at school . . . one of those defining moments. The point about school was that my brain was stuck in neutral for most of the time. I daydreamed all the way through senior school and never really listened to what was going on. But even so I somehow got into the high stream for maths, and when I was about twelve we started on calculus. We reached the stuff about drawing graphs, and then rotating them about an axis and measuring the results. I didn't see much point in that . . . but I started doodling, trying to imagine what the solids would look like. After a bit I came across the one where Y equals the reciprocal of X, which even when scribbled on a scrap of paper looks pretty intriguing.

Somewhere along the way I must have conflated the two ideas. I wrote *Inverted World* in 1973. I was young then, everyone wore flares and had silly haircuts . . . that distant era when even Harlan Ellison's *Last Dangerous Visions* seemed credible.

Speaking of which . . . do you have any idea why *The Book on the Edge of Forever,* your essay about this famous non-event, struck such a chord that it's gone through many printings and got shortlisted for the nonfiction Hugo?

To be honest I think there are two reasons, only one of which is to my credit. The essay started as a conscious exercise in investigative journalism. You don't get much of that in the sf world, and the Ellison non-anthology was a God-given story just waiting to be written. I think it came as sheer novelty to most people. All those lies and evasions, the bragging and boasting, the promises and betrayals. The story has a horrid fascination when it's set out factually.

At first I thought that people would simply read the story, say tut-tut, and pass on to something else. What I hadn't counted on was the army of Ellison camp-followers. These come in all persuasions, from the worst sort of toady up to a kind of fannish armed militiaman, bent on crazed revenge against Ellison for some long-ago slight, real or imaginary. When my essay first came out I got piles of mail from these types, respectively threatening me, and urging me to put on camo gear and pack a machine pistol. At this point I realized the thing could run and run.

So long as people keep pushing. . . .

Latterly, it's been egged on by Ellison himself. It seems that every time interest dies down, Ellison pops up to threaten me with something, or to make up some bizarre new explanation of his inertia. As you know, in recent weeks he's been comparing himself wonderfully with Michelangelo, working slowly but surely in the Sistine Chapel, while an angry pope rages below, insensitive as ever to genius. All this makes me think that in some odd way my essay gratifies his ego.

You've also released the essay on internet, which helps keep it going. But (he asked for the benefit of puzzled readers), that version is mysteriously called *The Last Deadloss Visions* . . . ?

Years ago I used to publish a fanzine called *Deadloss,* so when I wrote the first version of the essay, that title sort of presented itself naturally.

Have you used the famously vast resources of internet in other ways, in connection with your books?

The net is still too disorganized and unwieldy to be a really useful source of reference material, but the stuff is there if you know how to hunt around.

For *The Prestige* I downloaded several long texts about Nikola Tesla, but these were only useful in tiny bits. In the end a visit to the science library at Imperial College gave me what I really needed to know about him, and in fact most of the "hard" research for *The Prestige* was either practical (interviewing magicians and watching them perform) or from books.

But the Acknowledgements do mention a certain Usenet newsgroup. . . .

Yes, I discovered alt.magic, where practising stage magicians meet to chat and swap ideas. Or that's what I thought before I quietly joined. As in a lot of literary research, serendipity is the real name of the game. I'd hoped to pick up a few conjuring tips, but the threads in alt.magic actually fell into two much more interesting subjects.

One was obsessive jealousy about David Copperfield . . . this is the magician famous for large-scale illusions (like making the Statue of Liberty vanish), but who is actually much better at smaller stuff, particularly when he works with kids. He's unquestionably brilliant at this, the best of the lot, and the others are all mad with curiosity about how he does his tricks. The other thread was obsessive secrecy about protecting their *own* magical techniques! I had already decided that jealousy and secrecy were to be the main themes, but that newsgroup gave me a real insight into the mentality of magicians. It's all in the novel now.

Many writers go on and on about how serendipity really works: the perfect idea, fact or mood magically pops up in real life just when needed. Are you often lucky that way?

Yes, but you have to create the circumstances in which the luck can strike! Once I'm in the thick of a novel I'm always amazed at how many ideas turn up out of the blue: fragments of overheard chat, bits you see on TV, even some terrible holiday knick-knack which has been lying around your house unnoticed for years. All these can suddenly seem relevant to what you're working on. My novels have stuff like this growing all over them. The point is, though, that the same ideas would instantly wither if the soil was barren.

In *The Prestige* I was struck by what seems a highly significant anecdote about a Chinese stage magician who all his life pretended to be virtually crippled as part of the deception that made his best trick work. A real story?

Yes, that anecdote is genuine, and was what originally suggested the idea of the book. This particular magician is often muddled up with another one with an almost identical name, who is in some ways even more interesting. "Chung Ling Soo" was actually an American (real name William Campbell) who performed as a Chinese, in a direct lift from my man, Ching Ling Foo. It was "Soo" who was famously shot while trying to catch a bullet in his teeth.

Maybe he'd written an essay on Harlan Ellison. . . . Another link to reality is the memoir on stage magic by your character Borden, with a supposed modern edition from Dover Publications. I idly wondered whether you had in mind the Dover reprint of the 1898 *Magic* by Albert A. Hopkins, of which I've got a copy?

I used the Hopkins book, but the real influence was another Dover facsimile, called ***Exclusive Magical Secrets*** by Will Goldston. This provided the model for the book within the book. Goldston's original was sold with a lock and key (nodded at in the novel, when we learn a particular notebook has a lock), whereas Borden's book is described as "oath protected"; they seem to have gone in for these gimmicks in the past. Dover are just about the only mainstream publisher with a magic list.

Did you go to magicians' performances as part of your research? If so, were you still impressed, amazed, baffled?

Last year's meeting of the I.B.M. (International Brotherhood of Magicians) was in Eastbourne, just down the coast from here, so I grabbed the chance and went to their gala show. Ninety-nine per cent of the audience was made up of professional magicians, and highly appreciative they were too. This tends to underline the fact that performance skills matter more than secrets (since presumably most of them would know how the tricks were "done").

I quickly found my boredom threshold for sleight of hand is very low indeed. About half the show consisted of people doing clever but tedious things with playing cards. What I preferred were the big illusions, which is what my novel is really about.

One of Somerset Maugham's stories opens by summing up the dread card trick syndrome: "'Do you like card tricks?' 'No, I hate card tricks.' 'Well, I'll just show you this one.' He showed me three. . . ." What was your favourite large-scale illusion?

There was one that really intrigued me. Very briefly, a young woman wearing a bare-minimum stage costume was trussed arm-and-leg in ropes, so tightly she could hardly stand. Her colleague then went into the audience, and grabbed one of the men as a volunteer. They went back on stage, where there was a sort of tent arrangement, barely big enough for one person. The woman in the ropes was bundled into this tent, and then so too was the man from the audience, shoved in beside her. The flap of the tent was zipped up, and either by accident or design the man's head was caught in it, so it remained in sight. There was then evidence of furious activity inside the tent!

It all happened in less than five seconds. Next thing, the flap was unzipped, and the man stumbled out on the stage, looking dazed. The jacket of his suit was missing. Then the woman in the ropes staggered out too . . . she was still trussed exactly as before, but now she was wearing the man's jacket, ***under*** the ropes! They got a lot of applause.

Presumably, having swotted up on millions of magical effects for the novel, you saw through this in a trice. . . .

Not exactly! I was extremely intrigued by it. But you ***know*** something like that is just a trick, and that what you saw isn't necessarily what actually happened. There's a rational explanation somewhere, and you can't help wondering what the hell it is! By this time I'd done so much research into techniques that I felt I ought to be able to solve it . . . so I thought and thought about it, and finally worked it out. The funny thing is, I think they were using the same method that my chap in ***The Prestige*** was using! There are only about six different methods, anyway. Everything depends on the performance, and on the audience thinking: There's only ***one way*** that could be done, but they wouldn't have gone to that much trouble! Or would they . . .? But the thing is they usually would.

In *The Prestige* you yourself seem to play the part of stage-magician, with teasing misdirection, devious truths and surprises from unexpected directions. People who like neat genre pigeonholes will be left uncertain for a long time, and then made uncertain again. Fair comment?

All fiction misdirects the reader, or it can do. You hear thriller writers talking about it. What they mean is laying false clues, and all that.

But when a magician uses "misdirection" he's up to something more subtle and interesting. A magician plays on the audience's own assumptions so they misdirect themselves. The deck of cards still in its seal (so it *must* be brand new), the pitcher full of water (so it *must* be heavy to lift), the rope that has no knot (so it *must* be all one piece).

That was the kind of thing I was trying to get at in *The Prestige*, but as I say it's not all that unusual in fiction. The narrative voice is comparable with a magician's act . . . exactly as you were saying, about devious truths. Most people reading a novel told in the first person singular will reasonably assume that it's truthfully or reliably reported, or that only one person is writing it, or that no one apart from the narrator has tampered with the text before it was printed, and so on, but to me these assumptions open possibilities for a few sneaky reversals. All in the cause of keeping people awake!

It kept me awake well past bedtime, so I'm not complaining! Some people seem to have the dark suspicion that any such literary tricks are effete, artsy-fartsy decoration, when in fact they can help you construct a really gripping story. And there's an unmistakable science-fictional device lurking there too, with a nice Wellsian flavour. Not invisibility . . . but did I catch an allusion to *The Invisible Man*?

Yes, but almost all sf devices refer back, ultimately, to H.G. Wells. Him being the main man, and all that. Actually, this particular referral was through another of my own books, *The Glamour.*

Everyone in sf owes a lot to Wells. But, er, the specific device also set Langford the Ex-Physicist thinking on perhaps unfair and smartarse lines. A rough calculation led me to reckon that one electrically-powered stage illusion you describe, supposedly performed around the turn of the century, would demand something like the full output of a modern gigawatt power station operating for well over two centuries. . . .

I am, as you know, dedicated to the strict observance of scientific accuracy at all times. Ruthless for the truth, is what they say about me. But sometimes it doesn't half get in the way of a good story.

Yes indeed; and of course in your book, it *[microphone crackle, shrieking gulls]*. What's next in the mighty Priest literary pipeline?

It's probably a long way off, because these days it takes me three to five years to plan and write a novel, but I've already started taking notes for a book called *The Gloss*. It's too early to say what it will be "about", but I do know that matters of identity and explanation come into it. It's all something to do with mutter-mutter, mumble-mumble, you see.

On the other hand, as I plan more than one book at a time, I have two others in reserve. One of these is called *The Allure* (identity and explanation don't come into this one, but offensive sex and gratuitous violence do), and the other is untitled, and has slightly more mumble-mumble than mutter-mutter at present.

On which uplifting note, it must be time to finish. You know, implicitly we've been chatting on sunny Hastings promenade—but following all our discussion of narrative deceits I'll bet suspicious readers are wondering if this too might be subtly misleading.

POSTMASTER@cix.compulink.co.uk
***** Your email could not be delivered for the following reason: System downtime and seagull cries. Please resend your message at a later time.**

Thank you, Chris Priest! ◙

Bluff Your Way as a Priest Expert!

by David Langford

Indoctrinaire **(1970)**

Slightly abstract and surreal tale about a chap held prisoner in a version of Brazil. The most memorable sf plot device is the "live" hand growing out of a table which, during interrogations, points at our hero in a fearfully menacing way.

Priest: "It was a period. There are a couple of good bits, but unfortunately I can't remember what they are."

Fugue for a Darkening Island **(1972)**

Disorienting cut-up-and-reshuffled narrative of nasty events in an England swamped by African refugees from a nuclear war. At the time our author was dead proud of having slipped a rogue piece into the jigsaw story, one that doesn't actually fit anywhere.

Priest: "The first book of mine about someone who misremembers things. This has become something of a theme, based on one of my own failings. Another period piece, this is the one novel of mine where one hostile review wiped out any cheerful thoughts I ever had about the book, and I haven't been able to look at it since."

Inverted World (1974)

This world really is inverted, geometrically transformed from a sphere to a hyperboloid whose equator and poles taper off to infinity (which makes Larry Niven's *Ringworld* look a bit puny, though later on it was topped by mathematically "bigger" infinities in Rudy Rucker's *White Light).* Across the distorted surface trundles a whole city on wheels, fleeing disaster. . . . Mindboggling stuff, shortlisted for the Hugo award.

Priest: "The best opening sentence I ever wrote (even better in French!), and in the middle of the book is the best sf scene I ever wrote. I dined out on these two bits for about ten years after the book came out. I wouldn't be able to write *Inverted World* now, because I'd be too inhibited and self-conscious."

Real-Time World (collection, 1974)

Uneven collection of early stories, with two interestingly prophetic items: the grisly "The Head and the Hand", starring a performance artist who chops bits off himself before huge audiences, and the title story with its foreshadowing of later Priest preoccupations.

Priest: "This book happened because *Inverted World* did well. To be frank, I think it was too soon to put together a collection. But scarcity has its own dynamics, and the hardback has become by a long way the most collectable of my titles."

The Space Machine (1976)

A cheery romp: a gentle pastiche of H.G. Wells which begins with the assumption that *The War of the Worlds* and *The Time Machine* were episodes in the same alternative history, and helpfully fills in several gaps. Much of the action takes place on Mars, and we finally learn how the Martian invaders launched their capsules. . . .

Priest: "I thoroughly enjoyed writing this one, probably more than I should have done. For me it represents a kind of personal peak, because I wrote it in an extrovert mood during a happy period of my life, at a time when I wasn't too broke, and I was not yet feeling held back by other people putting labels on me. Everything went smoothly until publication day, when the *Observer* memorably observed, `Three hundred pages of homicidal tedium,' since then I have written in a state of politically correct humility."

A Dream of Wessex (1977)

The sf gimmick is predicting the future (or at least, a self-consistent possible future) by consensual hallucination in a kind of cyberspace. But the personalities of certain experimenters overshadow mere logical extrapolation. . . .

Priest: "This novel represents a kind of valediction to trad sf, because it explicitly describes the process of futuristic imagining, then subverts the whole business. It has recently been described as the novel that predicted virtual reality, but that's because whoever said it hadn't spotted the subversion."

An Infinite Summer (collection, 1979)

A mixed bag of atmospheric short stories. Besides the much-anthologized title piece this includes "Palely Loitering" (a BSFA Award winner) and the Hugo-shortlisted, TV-adapted novella "The Watched".

Priest: "Another chunk of mid-1970s Priest, a bit raw in places, a bit soppy in others, but with a particular mood throughout that I haven't caught since."

(An Infinite Summer and *The Affirmation* centre on the "Dream Archipelago" venue; two more published stories with this setting exist, "The Cremation" and "The Miraculous Cairn"—not collected with the others except in translated omnibus editions published in France and Germany.

Priest: "I have been secretly hoping I might one day get a British or American publisher to do the same, but would want to rewrite all the stories first.")

The Affirmation (1981)

Indescribable. Read it! As one reviewer (oh all right, Ian Watson) noted, this book—which only *seems* to end abruptly in mid-sentence—can be re-read with a new understanding as its own sequel.

Priest: "The first of the novels to make a deliberate effort to deal in a new and realistic way with stock sf ideas: in this case, immortality. The whole novel, from beginning to end, subverts reader expectations: everything is unreliable. As a result I think *The Affirmation* has the best overall plot I ever wrote, and also the best and most surprising plot revelation . . . on the other hand I think it has rough edges, caused by my being a bit nervous about what I was up to."

The Glamour (1984)

H.G. Wells's invisibility is physical: light somehow passes undisturbed through the invisible person. G.K. Chesterton's psychological invisibility (see his Father Brown story "The Invisible Man", which Chris insists he's never read) applies to people and things you don't notice, can't take in, have forgotten even though they're in plain sight. . . . *The Glamour* passes through this territory and goes far beyond.

Priest: "Another go at a stock sf theme: this time invisibility. Again, nothing about the novel can be trusted. I look back on this book and enjoy the plot, and the strength of the central metaphor (invisibility = memory loss), but once again I feel uncomfortable with certain short passages. *The Glamour* was once spoken of as a major Hollywood 'vehicle' for Barbra Streisand and Christopher Walken, a fact which ten years later *still* has the power to make my goolies shrink in horror."

The Quiet Woman (1990)

A deceptively understated tale whose backdrop is a withering extrapolation of Thatcherite excess: the media prevented from reporting the awkward fact of Southern England being partly radioactive, the barely restricted power of a now-privatized Military Intelligence, and worse.

Priest: "BBC-TV got hold of this one, dramatized it into a three-parter, hired a director, recce'd the locations . . . then did nothing until the contract expired. I was sorry about this, because apart from the obvious benefits of having a book on TV, I was dying to see how they would work out the story. This has an anti-plot: on the surface it's a story of a woman surviving a nuclear accident, but as soon as you delve into it nothing is certain any more."

The Prestige (1995)

The Victorian era: and two stage magicians are deadly rivals leading strangely parallel lives. Each has his own unique version of a major magical illusion; each is baffled by the other's method; the two different secrets go beyond mere mirrors and trapdoors to be the central defining and distorting factor in their owners' lives. Compulsive stuff.

Priest: "The newest one, and therefore still a favourite. I think for the time being I'm too close to it to have any idea how it fits in relation to the others, but the usual Priest stuff about misremembering is in there, and a plot with many intricate developments. This novel, with *Space Machine,* is the most widely researched of my books. I must by now know more about magic than most people, but I *still* don't understand how tricks are done . . . even when I find out."

SIDEBAR: A PRIEST PRIMER

Perplexed about Priest? Croggled by Chris? Want to break down the barriers, and enter the world of subversive shockers? Where to begin?

Langford suggests: "Lazy readers can sample the short stories in *An Infinite Summer,* some of which share the 'Dream Archipelago' setting also used in the very nifty *The Affirmation.* I'm mightily impressed by *The Prestige,* too."

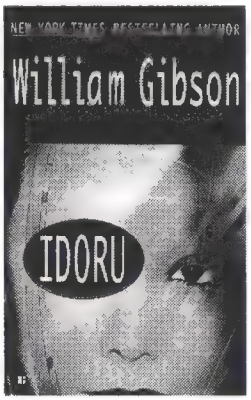
Priest says: "If you want trad sf, then *Inverted World* must be the one, but it's no longer typical. *The Affirmation* is a good example of what I'm still trying to do now. *The Prestige* is exactly what I'm trying to do now."

Internet Freebie: if you know how to do it, that Hugo-nominated Priest essay on Harlan Ellison's fabled anthology can be had via anonymous FTP from ftp.dcs.gla.ac.uk, pathname /pub/SF-Archives/Misc/Last_Deadloss_Visions-Chris.Priest

Or send e-mail to info-server@dcs.gla.ac.uk with the following lines in the body of your message:

request documents
topic deadloss
request end

. . . and a copy will magically arrive by e-mail.



Idoru

by William Gibson
Berkeley, 1997, $6.99
383 pp., ISBN 0-425-15864-0

Reviewed by **Julia Witwer**

He's right about the emptiness at the center. The importance of the lost dimension. Makes space for desire.

A Song of Stone

by Iain Banks
Little, Brown & Co., 1997, £16.99
280 pp., ISBN 0-316-64016-6

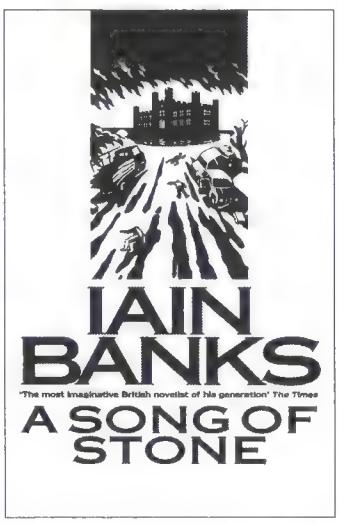
Reviewed by **Stephen P. Brown**

Americans know Iain M. Banks as the author of many fine and deeply weird space operas. However his alter ego, bestselling British mainstream writer Iain Banks, is puzzlingly little known over here. This Banks is a chameleon who has written eight novels ranging from the over-the-top surrealism of *The Bridge* to the gentle whimsy (with a barely concealed iron core) of *Whit.* Along this spectrum he's detoured into high-voltage crazed killer novels *(Complicity)* and minutely delineated neighborhood character studies *(Crow Road).*

Why these books don't make it in the US market is a continuing mystery to me. Publishers keep trying; currently HarperPrism has a handsome trade paperback edition of *The Bridge* out. It's our loss.

The new one, *A Song of Stone,* is—like all the rest—completely different in both subject and voice from the others.

There is a castle in an unnamed region that feels Bosnian. War has occurred and there has been a complete breakdown in all social structures. Endless columns of refugees clog the roads, roving bands of soldiers indistinguishable from looters prey on whatever is left to take, which isn't much. Such a band captures the first person narrator and forces him to lead them back to the castle from which he had fled.



Most of the novel is set in the castle. The narrator is the scion of a multi-

century old aristocratic family who grew up there. The leader of the band of soldiers (or possibly looters with patchwork stolen uniforms) is a brutal woman, the Lieutenant. During the course of the book, the narrator undergoes progressive humiliation and witnesses the complete disintegration of his life, his lifestyle, all that he has learned and believes in, and his sanity.

The book is written in this man's voice (and if either he or his country is ever named, I missed it). Banks has perfectly captured an ornate, world-weary style that takes a while to adjust to, but is ultimately a compelling counterpoint to the crude horror of the book's events and becomes compulsively readable:

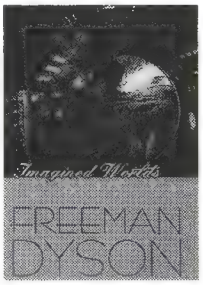
> Mud, dirt, filth, soil, the very earth itself, in all its slimy, scatological uncouthness, could be a source of pleasure. There was an ecstasy in letting go, a value in continence beyond its own reward. To remain aloof, to stay unsullied, to maintain a certain distance from the unholy marl of life could make the final embracing, the eventual taking and possessing of that fundamental quality, one of life's most sweetly precious, even blissfully acute pleasures.

At first we accept the narrator as a highly cultured, extremely civilized man unfortunately trapped in a barbaric milieu. But gradually, through hints and implications, the author shows us his distasteful and ultimately barbaric core; his petty cruelties, his awful upbringing, his arrogance, and other, darker aspects I'll leave you to discover. The Lieutenant, on the other hand, starts to become honorable, caring and probably a decent woman, had she not been trapped in the situation.

There is one other aspect of the narrator's voice that shows the author taking huge chances, demonstrating himself too clever by half, yet managing to pull off. I said the book was narrated in the first person; it isn't. Actually the book is written in the second person. In the few previous examples I've seen of this rare and clumsy mode, the second person is the reader: "You think you know how I feel." Iain Banks' object of the narrator's "you" is another central character in the novel, one who is actually present and partakes in the story. This character never speaks, but is spoken to by every word of the book. The character undergoes profound transformations and endures indignities that parallel the narrator's. They make an uneasy and complex partnership. I'd rather not say anything more about this, as one of the pleasures in reading the book is the slow dawning of awareness.

Perhaps Banks' career delineates the difference between the US and UK audiences. The UK audience delights in the novel, and embraces a writer willing to surprise them—and Banks' mainstream books become bestsellers. The US audience becomes rattled and restless when an author strays too far from previously established parameters—and Banks' self-similar sf books are widely published, while the mainstream efforts are little known.

Or perhaps this is facile bullshit. You decide. In the meantime, Americans: you think you know Banks? You don't know Banks. Find yourself a decent importer and get to work. ◘



Imagined Worlds
by Freeman Dyson
Harvard U. Press, 1997, $22.00
216 pp., ISBN 0-674-53908-7

Reviewed by **Stefan Jones**

A surprising number of sf fans have heard of Freeman Dyson. Indeed, thanks to an episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation,* an awful lot of trekkies have heard of Freeman Dyson. Unfortunately, most of them only know the name thanks to a concept—the sun-swaddling "Dyson Sphere"—that he won't even take credit for.

I freely admit tackling my first Dyson book to ease a fannish yen for the inside dope on Project Orion, a notion for space propulsion which matches the Dyson Sphere for chutzpah if not sheer scale. Had work on Orion (1955–1963) been completed, Americans might have been tooling around the solar system in the mid-Seventies . . . on giant space ships driven by a series of nuclear explosions. I found what I was looking for—and more—in *Disturbing the Universe,* Freeman Dyson's collection of autobiographical essays.

Had I waited a few years, I could have learned a lot about Orion's technical details from Larry Niven and Jerry Pournelle's *Footfall.* A besieged humanity uses an Orion-drive battlecruiser to take out the enemy in this alien invasion story. What I wouldn't have learned from this novel is Project Orion's political history, or the reasons why its creators decided to pull the plug on the scheme.

What I certainly wouldn't have gotten from *Footfall* is what I can only describe as Dyson's wisdom. The British-born physicist is a scientist and humanist, enamored with both high technology and nature, equally familiar with literature and quantum theory. He has designed both nuclear weapons and treaties to control them; built both nuclear reactors and alternate energy systems. Dyson comes across as a karmic mirror image of a flack for the SDI program. He is long on humility, caution, and needful details; short on sensation, jingoism, and bluster.

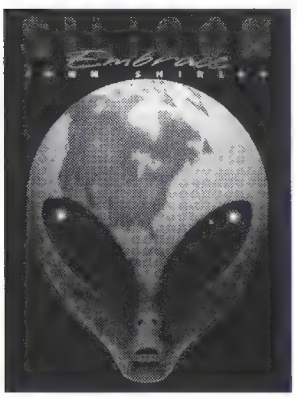
Dyson's latest book, *Imagined Worlds,* is based on a lecture series presented by Dyson at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. Its five chapters elegantly present the author's take on the perils and promises of technology and science. Dyson's prose is achingly clear and direct, his ideas incredibly compelling. Moreover, they are rooted in example and experience; as the title of the book suggests, he conveys his concerns through stories and scenarios . . . both his own, and from works of science fiction. He does so skillfully, and he's no snob: Chapter Three manages to work both *Jurassic Park* and Stapledon's *Last and First Men* into a discussion of genetic engineering.

Those enamored of *Analog*-style technological boosterism will probably get a severe bummer from this book. Dyson has little faith in Big Science, the magic of the market, and technological fixes. As a result, when Dyson does indulge his imagination, one can't hope but take him extremely seri-

ously. In the fourth chapter, "Evolution", he presents a refined and extended version of his "Greening of the Galaxy" scenario . . . a future in which humanity expands through the solar system and to the stars by short hops, comet by comet, in the company of life forms tailored to survive in deep space. sf's canonical space opera universes can't help but seem pale and little besides Dyson's tale of a galaxy settled by numerous clades of humanity; of collective minds and cometary forests; and of Lovelock's Gaia expanding to regulate the biosphere of the entire Milky Way.

Dyson freely acknowledges his admiration for and debt to science fiction. The scope and ethos of his vision of a galactic civilization owes much to Olaf Stapledon's *Star Maker,* and some of its aspects are in turn finding their way into some of today's sf. I've spotted "Dysonian" ideas in Robert Reed's *The Remarkables, The Heart of the Comet* by David Brin & Greg Benford, Bruce Sterling's *Schismatrix,* and Dan Simmons' *Fall of Hyperion.* I hope there will be more.

Imagined Worlds lacks some of the substrate of literary and personal anecdote that enriched *Disturbing the Universe* and *From Eros to Gaia.* Also, much of the book's hefty memetic payload will be familiar to readers of these earlier works. However, it is more distillation than rehash; if any one book can summarize the Dyson's hopes and fears and frustrations, this is it. And because Dyson uses a new set of technological triumphs and follies to make his points, I can recommend it to both devotees and those new to the author's work. ◙



Silicon Embrace
by John Shirley
Mark V. Ziesing Books, 1996
P.O. Box 76,
Shingletown, CA 96088
Hardcover/282 pp.
ISBN O-929480-44-9
(Trade edition), $29.95
ISBN O-929480-44-7
(Signed Edition), $65.00

Reviewed by **Paula Guran**

I am still thinking about this book. I can't even recall the last time I read a novel, closed it, thought to myself, "Oh, okay, now I am ready to read this for real," turned it over and opened it up again. Maybe with Vonnegut. But the last time doesn't matter, this time does and *Silicon Embrace* is that book.

This is not to say that it's a heavy, convoluted, philosophizing meandering into some sociological near-future terrain that is a Metaphor for Our Time and/or Contemplation of Our Future. Nope. It's an entertaining rip-roaring, postmodern adventure . . . and a straight-out way-cool "alien encounters explained" sf piece . . . and a gritty future noir post-apocalyptic landscape story . . . and a metaphysical exploration of human history. It's about darkness and life and survival and love and hate and the universe and God. *Silicon Embrace* combines the best of Shirley's slambam cyberpunk with a profound spirituality, wicked sense of humor, aliens, UFOs, and a sociological/philosophical slant that leaves your mind spinning. It's a fucking sonic boom of a novel that leaves its echo with us on the ground while it breaks the sound barrier. We have John Shirley once again speeding faster than light beyond where we *think* we are in speculative writing.

The near-future U.S. of *Silicon* is one of both chaotic factional barbarism and a semblance of order through a heavy-handed government. A government that has indeed covered up our encounters with aliens just as we always expected. Think of the *X-Files* amplified, electrified, rationalized and punked up. That's just the rhythm line. Now add a screaming, finger-slicing lead riff from an overview of human history and Planet Earth as a vast experiment. Plug in some metaphysical bass with a brilliant take on voodoo loa translated in urban spirits and a cascading keyboard of an incredible cast of individual characters from slimy warlords (military version and desert rat guerrilla as well) to evocative children to the most menacingly believable aliens, the most ethereal aliens and the most endearing semi-alien since ET to not one, but two redemptive heroes and, and . . . did I mention the constant commie, the GIrl, the symbolic performance artist, the . . . oh you are getting the picture? You haven't even got to the percussion section of deep and not so deep metaphysics and there is*more.* You haven't even *started* to see *any* of it and *that* is the *point.*

Deep breath . . . 2 . . . 3 . . . 4.

Silicon Embrace is also funny, sad, utter bullshit, completely serious, totally tongue-in-cheek, intellectual, anti-intellectual, cynical and optimistic. Shirley not only explains the universe in several different ways, he explains Science Fiction. That alone is worth the price of admission. It is most likely the most original work of speculative (or maybe other) fiction published lately. It has its flaws—you might get impatient, you will certainly be challenged, but your mind will most definitely be boggled. Obviously all this boggled reviewer can do is string together inadequate descriptive words to try and convey its impact.

Because the publishing world is gutless, genitalia-less and has substituted marketing for vision, you won't find this book in your local slush saturated bookstore. It's available only in hardcover from small press publisher Mark V Ziesing. So order it from our blessed specialty bookdealers (I know Darkest Heart has it in stock and available to ship—sales@dhbooks.com; Overlook Connection—overlookcn@aolcom—probably does) or direct from the publisher (see info above). But you'd better read it because somewhere some 18 year old kid, some gaggle of twenty-somethings are going to get hold of it and it may very well be the inspiration for the next revitalization of a near-defunct genre and you are going to be wondering why you wasted your time back in 1997 reading another serialization.

And yes, it is the third book in less than three months from John Shirley. It joins the re-release of *City Come A-Walkin'* and the collection *The Exploded Heart* to form an extraordinary trinity of writing that should not be overlooked. ◙

Nightside the Long Sun
Tor, 1993, $4.99
352 pp., ISBN 0-812-51625-7

Lake of the Long Sun
Tor, 1995, $5.99
340 pp., ISBN 0-812-55068-4

Caldé of the Long Sun
Tor, 1995, $6.99
370 pp., ISBN 0-812-53420-4

Exodus from the Long Sun
Tor, 1997, $6.99
430 pp., ISBN 0-812-53905-2

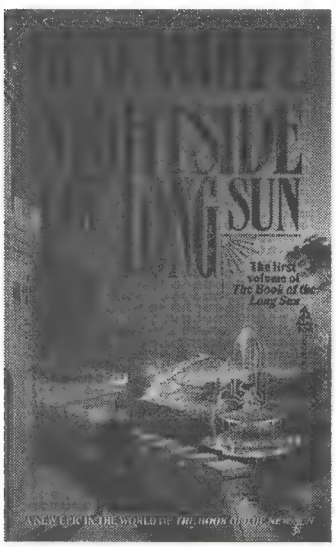
The Book of the Long Sun

by Gene Wolfe

Reviewed by **Patrick O'Leary**

The Book of The Long Sun is many books in one—each of them more impressive than any book I expect to read in the near future. So richly layered with invention and meaning and fascination that one's head spins trying to decipher the levels. Yet, the good news is one can enjoy this massive work at the simplest levels. As a tale of wonders, as an exciting adventure, as a masterstroke of Science Fiction World Building—it has enough holy cow for anyone to feast or nibble. It is more accessible than anything I've read by him. It is full of laughs.

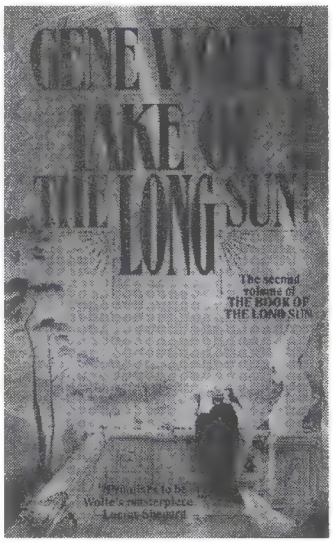
Patera Silk—the reluctant hero—is a priest (Wolfe doesn't call him a priest) with shaggy blonde hair and a batch of enlightenment in his brain. He lives in a world (he doesn't call it a world) inside a cylinder, see? Only it's not a cylinder; it's an immense generation starship with a neon (sort of) bar of light down the middle (perfectly plausible invention—try it sometime). The inhabitants do not know they occupy a ship. They take themselves for reality. This world/ship/"Whorl" is decaying; suffering a drought; entropy rules. It has been decades since any of the church's altar computers have hosted a divine visitation. The system is down. The gods are silent.



The silence is broken when a revelation is uploaded into Silk's mind. This happens in the very first line of the book and drives the entire adventure stem to stern. He has been given the key to the mystery of the whorl. Question: Are its inhabitants people, or cargo? What, in other words, is their purpose? How can one act meaningfully, morally, without the crucial knowledge of one's identity? These questions echo throughout the book.

It's up to Patera Silk to discover the answers, to decode the revelation of a mysterious god—"The Outsider", to save his parish (he doesn't call it a parish). The challenge is played out against a tragic backdrop as Silk's world becomes more and more mysterious and chaotic, as it grows larger (and, in a sense, smaller). His identity becomes less and less fixed and safe as he stumbles into a criminal underclass of thieves, whores and spies, as he descends into the terrifying maze of tunnels beneath his world, and he meets the ambiguities of politics, diplomacy, war, sex—the scale grows gigantic—the old gods die—each new revelation is more shocking than the last.

Silk—a most devout and gentle and honest man—must lose his faith, break his precious vows, learn to lie and kill and lead and love.



(The dog just threw up. I'm in the backyard. It's Saturday night.)

But, of course, this is Gene Wolfe. And nothing can be taken at face value. *The Book of The Long Sun* is a tale of deception and mystery. Each character has several names and at least one secret identity. People are a enigmas—and their most deceptive masks are the personas they take for granted.

It has a marvelous talking crow (Wolfe doesn't call it a crow) who provides much comic relief in a book with more laughs than any Wolfe I've read. He becomes Silk's loyal companion/familiar once his sacrifice has been botched. Did I mention that this gentle man is an "augur" who slices open animals and reads the future in their entrails? (Odd echoes of Severian sparing his "client" Thecla—the plot springboard of *The Book of the New Sun.* Severian the Torturer. Silk the "Butcher".)

There are nuns who are robots (sort of—and he calls them neither nuns or robots).

There is a Thief who becomes a prophet.

There are accommodating computer butlers in mirrors who conscientiously compliment their hosts on their appearance.

There is nun who becomes a military leader.

There are dead Presidents in prop-bodies (Been there, Done That)—creepy portraits of evil—Wolfe's very good at it.

There are significant "possessions" in every volume: some demonic, some divine, some merely human.

Each character is unmasked sooner or later. In fact one could look at the whole work as a meditation on Metamorphosis—everyone is in a stage of becoming something else. The most unlikely characters become sympathetic. Gods are redeemed. Charmers become monsters. Even Robots resolve their shame.

The voyage of the "Whorl" is a voyage of self-discovery as much as a trek to a new home (there are even two possible homes). Identity cannot be trusted.

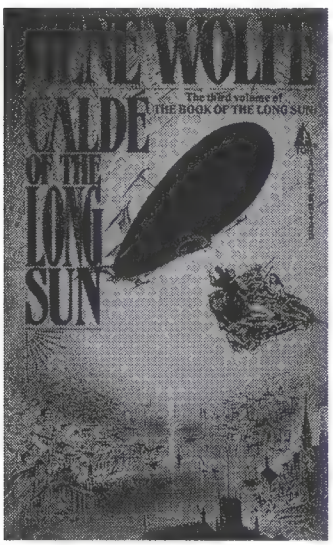
One of the *Book's* most shocking revelations has to do with the actual tale we are reading. So typical of Wolfe—he tucks it into the narrative like an aside—it is a mind-blowing moment very late in the book which treats his reader to a paradigm shift synonymous to those that have wracked his characters. We are no longer safely outside the text—we're in. And we may as well be Silk standing in the cockpit of The Whorl, staring for the first time at the stars beneath his feet.

Finally though, neither the self-consciousness of the text, nor the speculative ingenuity seem to be the point. This is part of Wolfe's greatness, I believe. Whatever his literary and sf sleights of hand, you never feel the cleverness is what matters; the people do. The destinies they choose are always moving and meaningful, as are the choices themselves. This is supremely moral fiction.

People die; it hurts. People love; it hurts. People are forgiven and change—and it hurts. Even Torturers are redeemed.

Those charmed by Wolfe's virtuosity when it comes to choosing names will marvel again at how his lexicon can be both original and familiar, archaic and advanced—as if we'd stepped into a neighboring reality which used almost the same words as we do. We are constantly looking at the familiar cloaked in the exotic.

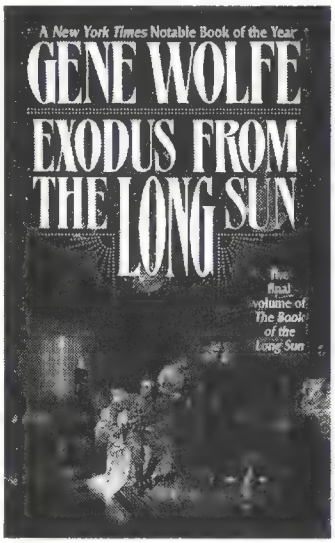
And the Talk! The Talk! The range of dialects alone is dizzying. And you know you're in good hands when a character is never identified but you understand who is speaking, simply by their voice. There's also a peculiar loquaciousness that most of the characters exercise. It is the one of the most seductive traits of Patera Silk. He says stuff like: "I have a question. No, two questions, actually. Ahh, make that three." Then he asks them, and (if you're lucky) maybe two get answered. I found this charming and soothing. Most of the time Silk is genuinely befuddled, trying—as the reader must—to make sense of his world. Yet we, the readers, are blessed with a peculiar foreknowledge of this world. We know they are our distant descendants. We recognize their variations on our cultural themes; They can only live them. And we can only follow Silk through his dark cocoon, praying for his emergence, yielding to his holiness.



Strange. At the heart of this grand tidal story of war and deception, misplaced faith and devotion, betrayal and loyalty lies an innocent man. A center of gentleness and sweetness.

The last thing I'd expect from Gene Wolfe.

Some Questions:



Why are there two of everything?

Why is everyone following the wrong god?

Why are the characters listed and exposed prior to the text? Major spoilers are included here. And the reader would be advised (in my opinion) to save them for the end.

Why is Silence so important? Three of the volumes begin in silence. One begins with a thunderstorm and a being "unruffled" by the noise. Watch out.)

Is a cane a sword? A microchip moolah? A clock a coffin? A god a program? A world a ship? A whore a Lover? A robot a person?

Why doesn't everybody know Gene Wolfe is the greatest writer alive? If he hadn't already written the best sf book ever (the Long one with the Sun in the title) I'd say This was It.

Recent News:

The world is a Jawbreaker.

There's a big ball of iron about the size of the moon at the center of the earth. It rotates on a slightly different axis, at a slightly higher rate of speed than the outer husk, so that it laps us every 400 years.

We live on a beautiful crust—Patera Silk.

It rests on an unstable husk—Caldé Silk.

It floats on a molten candy coating—Silk The Lover.

Which revolves around a ball bearing at the center of the earth—Silk's God, The Outsider. Perhaps, the one God we can trust.

In summary let me paraphrase the gushing blurb I wrote after reading an advance copy of the final volume.

> Thrilling, mysterious, heartbreaking, funny—*The Book of The Long Sun* is insidiously beautiful—it releases delayed detonations of pleasure days after you've read it.

This is art of the highest order. It has all the magic we expect from Wolfe: chilling beauty, dark intrigue and huge invention, and much we do not expect: love, tenderness and comedy.

It is a tale as big as life whirling like a cyclone about Wolfe's most lovable hero: Patera Silk. With deceptive clarity and stunning craft Wolfe concludes his classic tale of metamorphosis and redemption.

You have read nothing like it. ◘

Look out! THIS trash is headed Uptown!

FROM SKID ROW TO ST. MARTIN'S

The Psychotronic Video Guide
by Michael J. Weldon
1996, $29.95
646 pp., ISBN 0-312-13149-6

The Sleaze Merchants
Adventures in Exploitation Filmmaking
edited by John McCarty
1995, $16.95
212 pp., ISBN 0-312-11893-7

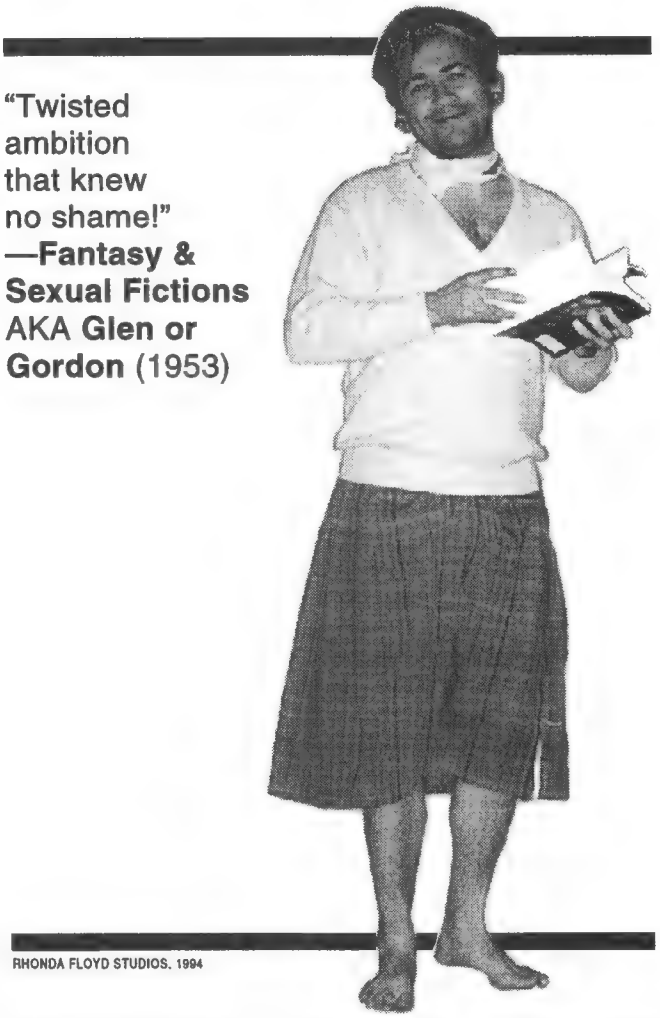
Immoral Tales
European Sex and Horror Movies 1956–1984
by Cathal Tohill and Pete Tombs
1995, $17.95
272 pp., ISBN 0-312-13519-X

Grindhouse
The Forbidden World of "Adults Only" Cinema
by Eddie Muller and Daniel Faris
1996, $19.95
159 pp., ISBN 0-312-14609-4

All published by St. Martin's Press.

Reviewed by **The Joey Zone**

"Twisted ambition that knew no shame!" —**Fantasy & Sexual Fictions** AKA **Glen or Gordon** (1953)



RHONDA FLOYD STUDIOS. 1994

Now it can be told:
Seemingly overnight—well, in the past two years, while NY's Times Square has been cleaning up its act by putting on mouse ears—a loosely-related, random series of books has come out documenting the spunk that refuses to wash off the underbelly of the modern psyche. A cultural "underground" has extended its fish-netted thews up on Fifth Avenue, daring to be assimilated by anyone ready to lap up the action. Various pleasures have been thrust at this reviewer, all emanating from the same publisher . . . Coincidence? Or the work of some savvy, albeit twisted, unshaven mastermind? Whatever the reason, the resulting Product is ready to be digested as well by *you,* the reader—if you've got what it takes . . .

The biggest and most essential of these books, Michael Weldon's *The Psychotronic Video Guide,* has been thirteen years in the making. Ever since publication of Weldon's earlier and seminal *Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film,* the public has demanded (well, *I* demanded) to read the Rest of The Story. All you had to do was pick up a copy of the magazine *Psychotronic Video* (still going strong, thank you very much! Write to 3309 Route 97, Narrowsburg, NY, 12764) to see the sheer number of unlisted and/or recently discovered/re-released films from Hong Kong to Brazil to the back patios of the midwestern U.S. The publication of the *Video Guide* had been announced for years, but St. Martin's has the honor of finally presenting this landmark cultural document. Of course, this means that by the year 2009 we'd better have a third volume . . .

To quote Weldon:

> Psychotronic®, that means horror, science fiction, fantasy, and exploitation movies. These are the releases that used to be called "B" features and were later popular in inner-city grindhouses, at drive-ins . . . Unlike other movie guides, nothing is omitted because it's in bad taste. All of this stuff is out there. You should know about it . . .

There are alphabetical reviews here of more than a staggering 3,000 (!) features that have been or will be released on video. The question I had on pre-publication was if there would be any overlap on the earlier *Encyclopedia.* THERE IS NONE . . .

The author proselytizes again:

> You might as well stop complaining and enjoy what you like to watch. Go to your local middle-of-the-road video store and demand that they stock more of what you want to see, whether it's Thirties comedies, Sixties biker movies, or Seventies lesbian vampire movies. It doesn't matter if they . . . consider themselves a family store. *Your* [this reviewer's italics] family deserves better . . .

"Better" ranges from *Abby* (1974), a blaxploitation *Exorcist*-ripoff to *Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain* (1981), one of the recent non-stop "chop-socky" fantasies. "Better" is the filmmaking "talents" of Ed Wood, Jr., Doris Wishman and others. "Better" is the barely amateurish acting, grainy cinematography, and laughingly cardboard special effects in a lot of these movies, which despite all of that, seem more *real,* therefore creepier, funnier, more arousing . . . *Not* better is the proven scientific *fact* that after reading every entry on every page like this conscientious reviewer, you'll want to get a membership to every video store within miles, gleefully letting your eyeballs dribble out of their sockets in an attempt to watch as many of these videos as possible.

"Every technique, theme, and idea formerly used in 'underground' movies is now in rock videos, TV commercials, major productions and on TV shows." But the difference is that, whether these movies were done for crass exploitation or an "inspired" vision, these movies (for the most part) aren't trying to be "underground" and therefore *are.* This brings us to the first book published here, John McCarty's *The Sleaze Merchants.*

Of the four items reviewed, this has the *worst* cobbled-together collage of a cover. More than a third of the text is devoted to "The Young Turks", among them directors Fred Olen Ray and David De Coteau; wannabes Linnea Quigley and Brooke Stevens; and studios like Troma that just try *too damn hard* (something John Waters also said to me in an interview done for the late, lamented fanzine *Damp)* and as a result present a Wal-Mart edition of "underground", let alone filmmaking. This isn't to say that nothing recently done is any good—Brett Piper stands out as a true talent, would that his stop-motion *Return of Captain Sinbad* be released soon.

This isn't also to say *Sleaze Merchants* isn't worth picking up, either. There are individual chapters on the usually-vilified Sam Katzman, Andy Milligan, and Jesse Franco. The section pertaining to Herschell Gordon Lewis deals with some of his non-"gore" features in depth as well, for a change. Someone should do full-length books on David Friedman and Al Adamson (there are *no* photos of his wife, goddess Regina—rhymes with "vagina"—Carroll here, however; a *serious* lapse), dammit! That said *Sleaze Merchants* is still a good primer to stateside exploitation films, with the inclusion of Franco.

Immoral Tales by Tohill & Tombs takes us to the Continent without a complete roadmap but with a lot of "scenery" along the way. There's a great color section featuring posters for Jean Rollin's *Le Viol du Vampire* (1968) (by *Heavy Metal* artist Philippe Druillet) and John Philip Law as the master criminal in Mario Bava's *Danger: Diabolik*)also 1968) among others. there's also a *lot* of full frontal female nudity which begs the question: Are European movies a lot less hung up on sex, or are European actresses a lot easier to exploit? Obviously, *Starlog's* readership doesn't want to know . . .

The work of Franco, Rollin, Alain Robbe-Grillet are discussed, with stops in Italy, France, and Germany (with a brief layover in Great Britain). Like I said before, it's not a complete roadmap: a lot of times a director will be indulged to rhapsodize on the psychological ramifications of his "art" without telling us what the damn movie's about, which doesn't help you decide if you want to try to track it down or not. Any book, however, that turns you on to something like Franco's *El Caso de las dos Bellezas/Sadisterotica* (1968—it was a very good year) is worth any amount of green. Despite its title, the plot of this sounds a lot like US "director" Jerry Warren's 1966 epic *The Wild World of Batwoman,* which visually predates the comix of Daniel Clowes by twenty years or so, which . . .

We all know where this is going, don't we?

The sucking pit called Trash Culture leads only to degradation of the physical as well as cerebral capabilities—that is to say, *sex.* You'll have enuf *cheese* on your shelf for a lifetime of mental fondues once you take a gander at *Grindhouse* by Muller & Faris. This may be the shortest and most recent of these releases, but it is the most beautifully designed, and most worthy of your sweaty palms after the *Video Guide.*

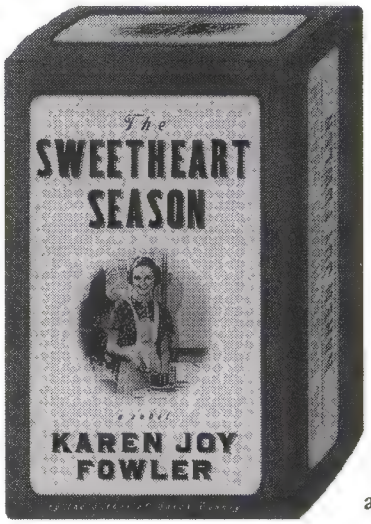
There is a color section in this as well, with the poster for the Ed Wood, Jr.-scripted *Shotgun Wedding* (1962). There is a complete look at sexploitation from the 1930s to the 70s, with great ads starting with *The Vice racket* (1936) ("It blasts The Truth before your eyes!") to one from one of the most interminable yet necessary experiences in *my* aesthetic growth, Dave Friedman's *She Freak* (1967) ("Filmed in actual locations where it *could* have happened!"). Directors such as Dwain Esper and producer Bob Cresse are given their due—you *will* want to see *Maniac* (1934) . . . *real* paeans to pulchritude like Betty Page and Marsha Jordan are, uh, "touched" on herein . . . you *will* learn the difference between "Nudies", "Kinkies", "Roughies", "Ghoulies", *and* "Goona-Goona" films . . . and is there any reason after reading the synopsis of *The World's Greatest Sinner* (1962) that there hasn't been a Tim Carey fan club by now?

Lurching out of the gutter of Skid Row, the aforementioned rancid heap collapsed on, then rolled down, the steps of St. Martin's Press, as well as our own consciousness. Whether this leprous waif should be kicked back underground or clasped to our bosoms is easily answered on this enlightened Eve of the Millennium. ◘

The Sweetheart Season

by Karen Joy Fowler
Henry Holt, 1996, $23.00
352 pp., ISBN 0-8050-4737-9

Reviewed by **Kathleen Ann Goonan**



The narrator of *The Sweetheart Season*, Karen Joy Fowler's second novel, identifies herself right off the bat—forgive the baseball pun—as unreliable. It is the story of the narrator's mother, as told by the daughter:

> You would do well then to keep always in mind that this is a story told by two liars. It is possible, therefore, our fictional impulses being so opposite, that we may arrive together at something clear-eyed and straightforward, the way two negative numbers multiplied together produce a positive value. If this happens it will be by accident. It is not my intention. I will go so far as to say I would consider it a disappointment.

What reader could resist such . . . honesty? And the aforementioned apologies are in order because this is a book about the Sweetwheat Sweethearts, a female baseball team. At least, on the surface, this is what the book is about. It is also about ghosts, mirrored realities, lost realities, and the realities unseen by those involved in the living of them. It is about how our myths—or even lies—about ourselves and others obscure reality, distort our expectations, and may lead to living a dishonest life or, to put it more mildly, an unhappy life. It is a stab at trying to understand how to get at those realities, which are often so inaccessible that our only hope is to wheel, once again, into fiction in order to get to any truth.

You can read this book for the sheer pleasure of the language, the effortless and continuously delightful narrative flow, the deeply ironic tone reminiscent of great American humorists such as Thurber and Parker, and the charming, lovingly (but not sentimentally) told tale of the town of Magrit, Minnesota, in 1947, when the boys were supposed to come home from the war and marry the girls they'd left behind.

Except that they didn't come home to Magrit. Or if they did it was only to touch down restlessly in this place which embodied the spirit of the past, where already, beneath the surface, changes were taking place.

The story: Margaret Mills was started at the turn of the century by Henry Collins, an ambitious businessman who was attracted to Magrit and the idea of manufacturing breakfast cereal by an omen. "Breakfast cereal was the wilderness, first tamed, and then eaten. It was family, it was America, it was a wholesome and American alternative to grain's other uses, a point that Henry made clear in his 1906 pamphlet, *Barley, the Janus-Faced Seed.*"

Henry also created Maggie Collins, America's expert on cooking, household hints, and etiquette, often combining the three as she answered letters in her column. And, in the 1940's, he created Sweetwheats, "America's first puffed and sugar-coated cereal."

Margaret Mills would not exist had not Henry dynamited Upper Magrit, the part of the town above the falls, where the few wealthier residents had built. The town voted, and Lower Magrit, having more residents, and being able to retain their dwellings, won. The resulting millpond covered the homes of Upper Magrit, creating jobs, longstanding resentments, and ghosts.

When the book opens, Irini Doyle, the narrator's mother, is nineteen. She had graduated from high school and is working in the Margaret Mills Scientific Kitchen. Irini has grown up with the girls she works with, and their personalities and relationships with one another ring quite true. She has a terrific right arm from kneading bread. Her father, who began drinking the day after Irini was born—also the day her mother died—is portrayed as wise, affectionate, direct, iconoclastic, and usually drunk. He might be called the Voice that Magrit, and America, does not want to hear: "The whole world's been sugar-coated. It's this labored American blandness. This forced optimism. It happened during the war, somehow. Darndest thing. We've seen the concentration camps. The mass suicides of the Japanese. We've seen innocent hostages shot and hanged, whole cities obliterated in a blink. And we still think we live in a Disney cartoon."

Henry Collins and his second wife Ada are not at all removed from the town. Ada has a somewhat eccentric and artistic bent, and midway through the book goes to India and returns to attempt to reunite the residents of Magrit through Satyagraha.

Meanwhile, the Sweetwheat Sweethearts have been created in an attempt at publicity and also to get the women in the Scientific Kitchen out and about and perhaps married. They are to tour the area and play against men's teams. This also has the effect of bringing Henry's grandson Walter back to Magrit to coach the team and perhaps gain an interest in running the mill; since the war, he has preferred California. Irini has always been indifferent to Walter's infatuation for her; she is somewhat nonplused to find that he now seems indifferent to her.

But things are changing, not only in Magrit, but in America and in the world. The mysterious Thomas Holcrum, devastatingly handsome and urbane, comes to down. No one seems to know why. Fish sticks, the convenience food of the future, are invented, but not by the Scientific Kitchen. Magrit, and Maggie Collin's philosophical accord with the woman of America and the world, are both apparently on the wane. To make matters worse, someone with an ax to grind has usurped Maggie's podium and no one can figure out who this is, since Maggie's column has always been written by a compendium; just about everyone falls under suspicious at one time or another.

Throughout the book the narrator raises doubts about

her mother's memories, her practice of always thinking the best of everyone and putting the best spin on every event, of seeing reality through a haze of kindness. The narrator contrasts this quality with the changes that have occurred in the American public since then: "These people had just fought and won a war . . . it was a war that seemed to provide and entire generation with evidence of their essential goodness, their innocence, their generosity. It seems to have been a war waged in an almost total absence of doubt. To us today, of course, this might as well be fairyland. The people who raised us are no more like us than the fairies are."

Magrit does not come through these changes unscathed. Throughout *The Sweetheart Season,* the narrator chronicles how this fairyland disintegrated into the present, though this aim is never in the forefront until, with true postmodern panache, the narrator comes right out with her own point of view, which ripples back through the book to its very first chapter. And then, you have to realize you *had* been warned.

Any fiction by Karen Joy Fowler rewards close reading. Her work is so seamless that it must be swallowed whole, as it were, to allow the insights and subtexts within to be digested. After this process, *The Sweetheart Season* seems to glow with a slow, deep fire, throwing a light which will not wane no matter how long you think about it, or how many times you reread the funniest, loveliest, or more thought-provoking passages.

Oh, yes. I have left the ape out of all this. Henry Collins is on a quest for an ape, a quest which follows hard on the heels of his bird-tagging enthusiasm of early spring. Eventually, he finds one. The ape is, I think, one of the leitmotifs of the book. Apes figure strongly in Maggie Collins' last, incendiary letters, the ones in which she admonishes women to leave their glowering husbands and screaming children, dance on the tables, order lobster, and take many lovers. I have also left out communism and just about everything concerning ghosts.

But there are some delights in *The Sweetheart Season* you will just have to ferret out for yourself. ◘

The Star Fraction
by Ken MacLeod
Legend, 1995, £10.00
341 pp., ISBN 0-09-955871-8

The Stone Canal
by Ken MacLeod
Legend, 1996, £15.99
322 pp., ISBN 0-09-955891-2

Reviewed by
Lawrence Person

If you want a one-sentence summary, Ken MacLeod's *The Star Fraction* is a post-cyberpunk libertarian science fiction novel, but that label obscures two important points. First, the novel's cyber elements show that Richard Dawkins has influenced MacLeod's work far more than has Ilya Prigogine, with both memes and "the blind watchmaker" forming vital chunks of the novel's intellectual underpinning. Second, its libertarian roots come out of the European leftist/radical tradition rather than the American anti-communist right of Ayn Rand and Robert A. Heinlein. The result is a rich, zesty, Eurocentric stew that not all stateside readers attracted to the "libertarian cyberpunk" tag will find to their taste.

The book takes place in a 21st century British Isles dystopia of fractured microstates ruled over by an oppressive US/UN hegemony. The plot follows Moh Kohn, a mercenary with the Felix Dzerzhinsky Workers' Defence Collective, owner of a very smart gun, and son of legendary communist programmer Josh Kohn, who accidentally lets one of his father's secret creations loose into the net. Feared by some as the much dreaded coming of "the Watchmaker," the self-organizing AI that will take over the entire datasphere, Moh's actions draw the attention of both Stasis (the US/UN's regulatory heavies) and the anti-technology Carbon Life Alliance. Soon Moh finds himself on the run, aided by research chemist and love interest Janis Taine (whose psychotropic research helped trigger Moh's memories) and Jordan Brown, financial trader and net wizard in the repressive theocratic microstate of Beulah City, who stumbles onto the "Black Plan" program for revolution that Kohn the elder also created.

Complex? You bet. And that only begins to describe the intricate convolutions and political machinations of MacLeod's labyrinth plot. With so many balls in the air, some are launched on such eccentric trajectories that they only appear in fleeting glimpses throughout the book. For example, the AI subplot, in many ways the book's most interesting science fictional element, is given barely ten pages of attention, and I question the wisdom of trying to weave two simultaneous love stories into an already overcomplicated novel.

Still, once the novel picks up steam it's quite engrossing, and those willing to undertake the journey will find it a rewarding one. MacLeod's ability for juggling multiple characters and plot lines is prodigious, his touch at staging action sequences deft, and his skill at creating a detailed, nuanced future apparent throughout the book.

Though its political focus makes John Shirley's *Eclipse* trilogy the most obvious point of comparison, The *Star Fraction* also brings to mind a number of other post-*Neuromancer* works, including Victor Milan's *Cybernetic Samurai* and Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash* (especially in its depiction of balkanized microstates). And even traditional libertarians uneasy at having their antistatist polemics cloaked in the language of the left will be hard-pressed to find fault with the novel's ultimate pro-space message. All in all, *The Star Fraction* is well worth reading, and may be the most impressive first novel to come out of the UK sf scene since Paul J. MacAuley's *Four Hundred Billion Stars.*

(Reviewer's Postscript: After turning in the above review, I was pleasantly surprised when the Libertarian Futurist Society awarded *The Star Fraction* the Prometheus Award

for best Libertarian Science Fiction Novel of 1995. All the more impressive since it still hasn't been published in a US edition . . .)

As striking a debut as *The Star Fraction* was, it couldn't prepare readers for the huge leap (both figurative and literal) MacLeod makes in *The Stone Canal.* Though a quasi-semi-demi-sequel to his first book, MacLeod has crafted *The Stone Canal* to stand impressively on its own.

The book starts with libertarian/anarchist political theorist Jonathan Wilde (glimpsed briefly as an elderly bookseller in *The Star Fraction)* being resurrected by "human equivalent" robot Jay Dub on New Mars. Jay Dub was a previous incarnation of Wilde who is now struggling against Wilde's ancient friend/political rival/possible murderer Dave Reid. Matters are further complicated by the fact that Reid (the most powerful man in the working anarchy of New Mars) just had Dee Model, his gynoid sex toy, go rogue on him, and Wilde is somewhat miffed to learn that Dee was cloned from his own late wife's DNA . . .

The Stone Canal's narrative follows Wilde and Dee's separate struggles against the techno-anarchist backdrop of New Mars, while alternating chapters tell how Wilde and Reid became rivals back on 20th and 21st century Earth. This technique allows MacLeod to unveil his wonders at a measured pace, saving the grandest revelations for the last four chapters. Until then, just what the "Malley Mile" and the "fast folks" are remain a tantalizing mystery, but their unveiling is awe-inspiring science fiction at its best.

If Gibson, Shirley and Milan are the ghosts haunting *The Star Fraction,* the animating spirit here is clearly Greg Bear, as the Big Science secrets so impressively displayed at the novel's heart recall both *Blood Music* and *Eon.* MacLeod has managed to make the cosmic and technological themes in *The Stone Canal* even broader and better realized than those in his first book, while focusing more successfully on a smaller cast of characters. Indeed, his deep, colorful characters and sure, witty grasp of dialogue earn him justifiable comparison with mentor Iain Banks (the quintessential Ken MacLeod scene is characters debating political theory in a bar while getting thoroughly plastered).

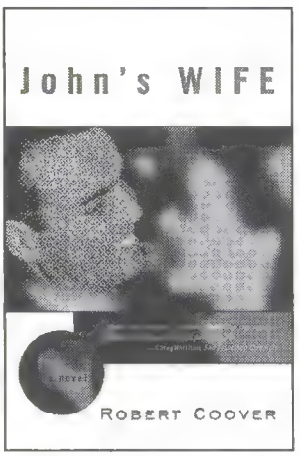
Flaws? A few, mostly minor. How sentient, self-evolving machine life came to New Mars is never adequately explained. American readers might find themselves slightly puzzled at Scot- or Britocentric names and dates (cf. 1688) tossed around the same way we might mention 1776. And the sense of wonder revelations make resolution of the various character conflicts somewhat anti-climatic.

But these are gnats compared to MacLeod's central achievement. Indeed, the "fast folks" serve as an irresistible metaphor for not only MacLeod, but all the other post-cyberpunk writers (Bear, Ian McDonald, Neal Stephenson, Bruce Sterling, and a handful of others) honing the genre's cutting edge. By pushing the envelope so hard, they've left the rest of the pack behind and are now competing wholly among themselves. Theirs may not be the only game in town, but it's certainly the most important. ◙

John's Wife

by Robert Coover
Scribner, 1997, $13.00
428 pp., ISBN 0-684-83043-4

Reviewed by **Paul Di Filippo**



There is a certain kind of fantasy that undermines and subverts mimesis while simultaneously and paradoxically employing realism's very own bag of tricks. I'm thinking of works by Acker, Barthelme, Barth, Pynchon, Auster and others, all of whom can write hypersensual, evocative rings around such reputed masters of realism as Updike, yet all of whom also delight in shaking the jello foundations upon which consensus reality rests. Call their work slipstream or postmodernism, it usually moves from the false security of the everyday—hearth, bedroom, street and office—to lands of unreason and nightmare whose topologies overlay the familiar. (Or perhaps we should say, more positively, that such books move from realms of self-deception to lands of suprarationalism and enlightenment.) Looked at psychologically, such journeys are away from the ego and superego and into the depths of the id.

A past master of such voyages into the dark jungles of slippery irreality is Robert Coover. Some years ago in these pages, I nominated his *The Public Burning* (1977) as one of the Top Ten SF Novels of all time, which should give some indication of my appraisal of his work. I'm delighted to report that his latest book, *John's Wife,* is a strong continuation in that earlier vein, a rambunctious, bracingly misanthropic, unflaggingly sulfuric ass-paddling of all that is basest in modern America.

One of postmodern's best gambits is to take a washed-up old genre and turn it inside out: perhaps by reversing its suppositions, or even by honoring its cardinal tenets more seriously than its original practitioners ever did. (And remember Ishmael Reed's dictum, that once the parody is esthetically superior, it displaces the original.) This is the path Coover follows in *John's Wife.* Parody is perhaps too mild a word to define such a move, although Coover does not mind endorsing this handy term early on, when a character opines that "parody . . . focus[es] the attention in a way that the everyday realities of existence cannot."

Turning to such ur-models of smalltown dish-the-dirt books as Grace Metalious's *Peyton Place* (1956), Coover creates a typical nameless suburban environment, replete with fading village center and surrounding mallsprawl, that can represent our whole country in microcosm. Then he populates it with as messed-up a bunch of venal, short-sighted

knuckleheads of both sexes and all ages as anyone could imagine (with one goddess-like exception, the title character). Over a relatively short realtime narrative (which doesn't actually begin till almost the halfway point of the novel), these ego-driven monsters manage to destroy various lives, careers, prospects and properties in their ham-handed rape of the American Dream: lies, libertinism and the pursuit of other people's spouses.

Coover adopts one major stylistic trick to tell his story: it's what I like to think of as the sliding POV, most famously found in William Gaddis's *JR* (1975). An omniscient narrator swings his flashlight of illumination in seemingly random arcs, jumping from character to character in elegant, unforced, unpredictable segues. The mere mention of a name or place or incident will trigger the jump in POV, almost as if this printed book were hypertext (one of Coover's main interests) and we were following the whimsical path links taken by some Master Reader. Coover's prose, other than exhibiting this twitchiness, remains a model of colloquial, crystalline beauty. Sentences such as "Alimony would have been zip in those shiftless years adrift" are at once flawless poetry and utterly believable as spoken (or mentally rehearsed) everyday speech.

As mentioned, nearly the first half of the novel is devoted to the backstory of Coover's specimen village and its populace. Their intimately interwoven fates and histories are conveyed gradually, until we are utterly conversant with all the poisonous ties that bind them together. Here we find all the stock characters of such a tale, amplified. The alcoholic car dealer, the newspaperman who's a failed novelist, the photographer of weddings and kids who harbors voyeuristic tendencies, the trailer-park whores and multiply divorced nymphos. Coover spares no pains to reinvigorate these archetypes with fresh eccentricities.

At the heart of the town is the property-developer and modern Babbitt, John, and his numinous wife, who is never otherwise designated. John is a kind of conscience-less force of nature, at once constructive and destructive, at ease with his own personality, which trait puts him two steps ahead of anyone else in his social sphere. His wife is another matter entirely. A kind of half-seen spirit of selfless goodness, she is somehow above all the petty doings of her fellow citizens, a Platonic vacuity, yet not unwilling to plunge into the mire to help them. (Resonances of the Beauty and the Beast myth will be apparent here. A slyer subtext, I believe, is a parallel with JFK and Jackie O, who was our most famous "John's Wife." Since Coover's title character is frequently seen waving from a convertible in the town's Pioneer Day Parade and is chased by what amounts to a paparazzo, I believe the parallel is undeniable.) Unfortunately, John's Wife begins to evaporate—much like Pynchon's Tyrone Slothrop—partway through the book, and with her vanishing, chaos is unleashed. Order is restored only with her reappearance in John's bed—with another man, her first transgression that proves her general virtue—at novel's end.

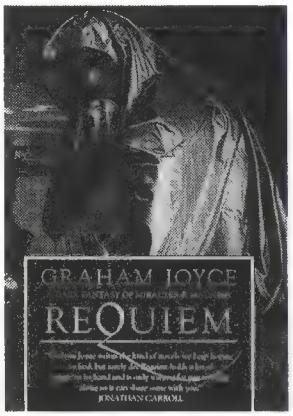
The nature of the chaos is where the fantasy element comes in. After rigorously pursuing a realistic agenda, Coover pulls the rug out from under the reader in the last third or so of the book with a fantastic *Walpurgisnacht.* Deploying bouts of telepathy and directed dreaming that seems to alter reality, an Attack of the Fifty-Foot Woman and a sexual encounter between two sleeping people on a midnight golf course (don't even try to imagine how they got there!), among other Rabelaisian wonders, Coover insures that all his main characters will undergo shattering experiences that will leave them forever altered, their fates being detailed in an old-fashioned wrap-up at book's end.

Lurid, sex-crazed, bitingly satiric, *John's Wife* is a *Winesburg, Ohio* (1919) for a world where parody is the truest lie. ◘

House of Lost Dreams
by Graham Joyce
Headline Books, 1993, £4.99
402 pp., ISBN 0-7472-4248-8

Requiem
by Graham Joyce
Tor, 1996, $22.95
286 pp., ISBN 0-312-86088-9

Reviewed by **Paul Di Filippo**



Is it possible to write horror without being cruel? Cruel to the writer himself (forced to employ his imagination to fashion naught but gruesome scenarios); cruel to the characters (forced to endure unrelenting misery); and cruel to the readers (forced to submit helplessly to the author's staged tortures and injustices, and to share empathetically the characters' distress)? This seems to me the central question implicit in the writing of horror, and I do not believe it will be answered or satisfied with any sort of minor tacked-on "salvation" that comes a few pages before the end of a book, after countless episodes of gleeful brutality.

I had despaired of ever seeing a modern author who might attempt such a synthesis, invoking both compassion and a kind of shivery awe at the Juggernaut nature of the universe when unmediated by human consciousness and spirit. But now I have hope once more, having encountered the work of British writer Graham Joyce.

In the two books of his that I have recently enjoyed, Joyce manages to both caution and reassure, to dramatize sucking sinkholes of occult and psychological misfortune—and the human hand that extends to pluck out the victim.

House of Lost Dreams appeared in 1993 from Headline Books of England, but has yet to receive an American edition. I owe my perusal of it to a loan from the generous Nic Farey. The novel most U.S. readers will encounter is *Requiem,* and they can console themselves with the fact that it's even better than its predecessor, with which it shares certain core stylistic and thematic similarities. (Already out in the U.K. is *The Tooth Fairy* Joyce's latest and hopefully also an upcoming import.)

House is the story of a young married British couple, Kim and Mike, who have relocated themselves in a moment of abandon to the Greek island of Mavros. Renting "The House of Lost Dreams," a primitive cottage, they find themselves subject to a bewildering array of quasi-natural phenomena, including an apparition of Saint Mikalis, a rather nasty lager-lout of a holy man prone to chastising heretics with blows from his metal-shod feet. Over the course of a few months, hidden faultlines in Mike and Kim's marriage begin to grow exposed, under the influence of outside events, supernatural and otherwise, not the least of which is the unexpected arrival of a woman friend with whom Mike has once previously cheated on Kim. How Mike and Kim fall into a kind of hateful travesty of their former love (a state depicted with the same sort of realistic, uncompromising fierceness exhibited in Kathe Koja's work), and how they are rescued from the worst elements of their natures (mainly thanks to the intercession of a wise shepherd named Manoussos), form the bulk of the tale.

Several features of Joyce's writing are plain in this early book. Like a different generation of horror writers—M.R. James and Algernon Blackwood spring to mind—he is an aficionado of subtle, half-glimpsed, teasing horrors over explicit, implacable, unsophisticated ones. The blur seen out of the corner of one's eye that can never definitely be pinned down, a tear in reality that might be attributable to strained vision alone, is to Joyce—and myself—infinitely more interesting than the nastiest flesh-rending monster. Although when it does climactically come to making his bogeyman concrete, Joyce succeeds admirably there too, steel-shod saint a case in point.

Also apparent is Joyce's strong fascination with geographical place as determinant of action and atmosphere. The island of Mavros is rendered with a wealth of sensual detail (based on Joyce's own residence on Lesbos). Joyce's characters do not exist in a vacuum, but as figures embedded in a highly distinct place and time.

Finally, Joyce's fascination and sympathy with religion, specifically Catholicism, confers a unique angle to his vision. A buzz of C.S. Lewis and Charles Williams—an Inklings tone—grants a deeper dimension to the experiences his characters are undergoing.

All of these signature methods of attack and sources of unease resurface in *Requiem.* But whereas *House* was limited in its overall effects by a certain shallowness exhibited by its central pair (Mike and Kim were both rather non-insightful, operating on instinct and exuberance), *Requiem* is a more mature production, both in what it says and how it says it. In this book, Joyce has refined both his subject and style, heightening each considerably.

Tom Webster—older and sadder and more conversant with his own defects than *House's* Mike—is a British schoolteacher and a recent widower. His wife Katie was lost in a freak accident, her car crushed by an uprooted tree (note the intersection of landscape and fate). Consumed by guilt—exactly why, we as readers are at first unsure; one of the book's many intriguing mysteries—Tom feels his life spinning out of control, especially with nightly visitations from an unseen knocker at his door whom he surmises is Katie's ghost. In a desperate move, based mostly on unconscious reasoning (and we will discover that Tom's twisted, self-deceiving unconsciousness is the true and only villain and panurgic force in this whole affair), he decides to quit his job and visit Jerusalem, where dwells his only good friend, a female chum from college named Sharon (a vital, comic, lusty type fully rendered). He could not possibly make a worse—or is that a better?—move. For though Tom will encounter in Jerusalem all that he is fleeing, inexplicable terrors and archetypical forces of the psyche, he will also emerge from the far end of his life-threatening experiences with a hard-won wisdom.

Joyce's evocation of Jerusalem is fully as strong as his portrait of Mavros. Through his sleek, poetic prose, delivered in punchy, fast-moving chapters, the ancient city becomes simultaneously a vivid collection of archaic architecture and mysterious ethnic types, as well as an exteriorization of the collective human mentality, not "a city [but] . . . a living creature, made of blood and clay and dust and dreams."

The religious thread in this book is even more fully integrated than was the Orpheus-Maenad-Saint riff in *House.* Coming into possession of a scrap of the Dead Sea Scrolls, Tom finds his visions taking on a Gnostic quality that relates dramatically to his own personal betrayals and infidelities. Joyce reveals himself to favor a Goddess-slanted interpretation of Christianity, evident also in *House's* identification of a sacred rejuvenating spring with vaginal imagery. Joyce's male characters fall into trouble mostly when they contravene this female basis of the universe.

With features reminiscent of the work of Dick, Hitchcock, and Ian McEwan, *Requiem* is a strong, thrilling novel that proves hope and dread weigh equally in the cosmic balance. ◘

The Troika

by Stepan Chapman
The Ministry of Whimsy, 1997, $14.99
239 pp., ISBN 1-890464-02-3
P.O. Box 4248
Tallahassee, FL 32315
http://www.mindspring.com/~toones/ministry.htm

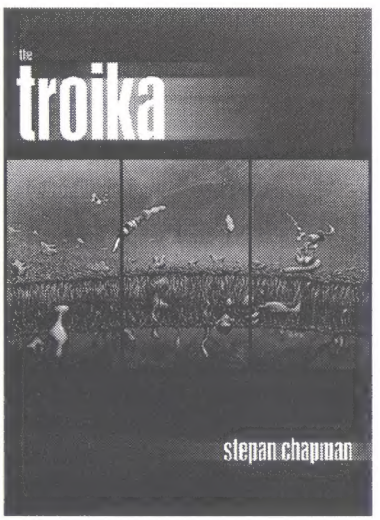
Reviewed by **Kathleen Ann Goonan**

To read *The Troika,* the intense, fascinating book by Stepan Chapman that was years in the writing, is to enter a plastic world where flesh, psyche, and inert matter change form constantly and inhabit one another in a wildly intersecting, constantly fluctuating dance of torture and wonder.

It begins as a word salad bound together with a dressing of wit and insanity. A jeep, an old woman, and a brontosaur are making their way across a desert of blowing sand beneath several suns. They share thoughts, and their thoughts are full of invective and irritation with one anoth-

er. Occasionally one of them may kill one of the others out of rage. Though this is painful, the victim pops back to life eventually. Frequently, terrible storms engulf them. They may wake from one of these storms in the body of one of the others—the personality within the jeep may now be in the body of the old woman, and so on. They will still be just as annoyed with one another and with their situation. Though they cannot really die, they definitely suffer. This has been going on for as long as they can remember.

> Naomi watched poor Alex, the Man With No Head, feeling his fearful perplexity in her circuits, hearing the echoes of his phantom rages, the whispers of his amputated lusts. She imagined her image of the brontosaur's muzzle, the rutted folds of skin around one glossy black eye. How much older could they all *get?* Where would it *end?*



Family therapists might marvel at the psychological truth of Chapman's portrait of what the players call themselves—a family, and a nuclear family at that; one that is definitely, to use the parlance of the day, dysfunctional, and unable to separate. Alex (first introduced as the jeep), Eva (the old Mexican woman), and Naomi (the brontosaur), think of themselves as father, mother, and daughter, though they don't really remember why. They are bound together in a seemingly inextricable history of pain. As their stories gradually emerge, in language immediate and utterly engaging in and of itself (think of a narrative where almost every other line seems to rise to the level of poetry), they reveal snippets of the history of this ruined Earth—but never enough at one time to show an entire and cohesive picture. It is a portrait of a world gone past madness, a tale covering imponderable chunks of time, a history of cruelty and horror and an occasional redemption. It is also, often, very funny.

Alex's ambition, even before the year 2000, is to become a machine. He begins with various prosthetics and develops his own twisted philosophy of the post-human. He might be said to reach his apex in a scene in which he is a manic robotic mobile extermination unit in a dying Tucson. His systematic destruction of a house while looking for giant mutated cicadas is hilarious:

> When I shut the door behind her, the house was *mine.* It was just me and the bugs now. But first I had to prep the floors.
>
> I took my claw hammer into the living room and got down on my knees in the magazines and crackers and tried to pull up the fucking carpet tacks. But there was all this fucking *furniture* in my way. *The hell with the carpet tacks,* I said to myself. *I'll rip up the fucking carpet with my fucking bare hands!*
>
> So I did. The television pitched off its stand and smashed. A bureau full of knicknacks fell on its side. But *fuck all that shit!* I had *work* to do! I tore the rug up, wrapped the TV and the birdcage in it, and dragged the whole mess into the yard.

It gets worse. Or better, depending on how you look at it.

Eva, on the other hand, remembers being raised as a priestess to be sacrificed, in a sea-themed world with an Aztec flavor:

> A crowd of squat, round priests waddled into the chapel, pushed aside the squid mothers, and surrounded Eva. They wore crimson lavalavas and necklaces of volcanic glass over their spiny bellies. Their scales were the colors of maize kernels—red, orange, and yellow. Little fins were all they had for arms. They had just enough head for their wide, toothy mouths. One of them bellowed up at Eva: "Come with us!"

One of Naomi's stories goes like this:

> And I'm not a *prehistoric* dinosaur *anyway.* Shows how much *you* know. *I'm* the product of a more advanced technology than *you* are. I was woven on a gene loom.
>
> . . . Of course my *brain* remembers all that. But the army kept my brain frozen for centuries. Then they planted it in this *apatosaur.* So the tumor isn't *my* fault. They gave me a bad brain, the brain of an executed kidnapper. They court-martialed her, sent her to the electric chair, and cut her up for spare parts. The brain must have been incorrectly labeled, or they would *never* have used it.

But—are these really memories, or only dreams? What, the threesome wonders, separately and together, is the nature of reality? Why is all this happening and why does it never end? Whatever they are (and we do find out), these scenarios are only a fraction of the outrageous stories that these characters relive in *The Troika.* Their tales reveal a terrible, bizarre history in which the Earth has been overrun with pollution, pounded by weapons, devastated by a humanity rearranged and estranged from its own organic beginnings.

Quotes from Lewis Carrol, Edward Lear, and Mother Goose aptly set off each chapter. It is difficult to remember Mother Goose as being quite so bleak:

> And when your back begins to smart
> It is like a penknife in your heart
> And when your heart begins to bleed
> You're dead and dead and dead indeed.

Over the years, excerpts of *The Troika* have appeared in various literary magazines, and some of the chapters have the polish of setpieces, though they are all intrinsic to the book.

The Troika does have a story to tell, and it does have a resolution—one that is altogether satisfying. If you enjoy finely controlled absurdity, freewheeling invention pinned down with precisely detailed description, black humor, and language that is breathtakingly engaging, there is little more to be said except "Read this!" ◘

HOW THINGS WORK: After the bills are paid, you hardly have the spare change to eat lunch on a regular basis, let alone buy what could be a potentially *un*filling $5 zine. But you soldier on, pulling bouquets out of your butthole, providing a column for your editor, free advertising for those you review, and cramps for your right hand . . . Now you are me, and I am you, and we are all together, so let's just say *complimentary* copies are GREATLY appreciated when sent to da Zone c/o this magazine. If it's crap I won't waste anybody else's time after you've stolen valuable moments from my life NEVER TO BE REGAINED. But there's always a system to divide loaves & fishes when it's manna from heaven . . . It still won't be a completely free ride for me by a long shot, however—most of the stuff I've reviewed parking meters have died for . . .

But first, the Pan of The Issue.

1) "A real shit-piece CEO spreadsheet" is how one panelist on "The Future of Arts Underground" at Readercon '96 (me) described **Wired** . . . any further verbiage would be a waste of ink, but any halfway intelligent contributor to said publication should leave now while they still have a shred of credibility, Bruce . . .

2) On the other hand: Thom Metzger's **Blood and Volts** (Autonomedia) is so fuckin' cool & well written as Metzger is so cool & a real writer, that anything less than a full review in the "Eyetracks" section would be punishable by The Chair. So that's where you'll find all my comments, except the proposal for a coffee-table art book featuring the "Dynamort" motif—just in time for the holidays . . .

3) **Guy Boothby** was an Edwardian Australian writer who created the evil anti-Holmes, Dr. Nikola. The sporting artist Cecil Aldon describes a brief visit to Boothby's digs—"a gloomy apartment with hideous fish"—which sounds a lot like one of Nikola's strongholds. In all the illustrations for the series, Nikola's pet cat Lucifer was drawn separately by Louis Wain. Is any of this in print?

4) **Juxtapoz** ($3.95 an issue: 1303 Underwood Ave., San Francisco, CA, 94124-3308) is the only real Art Alternative when it comes to regularly published lowbrow art d'elegance . . . issues feature such maestros as Von Dutch, R. Kern, Chris Mars, Ernst Fuchs—shit, these are just the Names . . . the "Arts" column makes ones like mine irrelevant, see #9 below for one of their hot tips.

5) **Basil Woverton, The White Peril of Venus.** A 37,000 word NOVEL done when Basil thought—of all things—he should be a science fiction writer. Probably a goddamn classic. Some canny publisher will put this out for geeks like me. Sympathy, anyone?

6) **Michael Borden Bookdealer** (2774 East Main Road, Portsmouth, RI, 02871, 401-683-4872)—it's a good thing Borden doesn't deal crack because it'd be of such a fine, one-of-a-kind esoteric quality I'd be in lockup faster than you can say Robert Downey, Jr. (then again, I believe Steve Brown bought a copy of *Red Dirt Marijuana* from him . . .). When Gordon "Santo" Van Gelder loses out in the free-for-all for a book to me, you know I'll use every reserve of strength to patronize this guy.

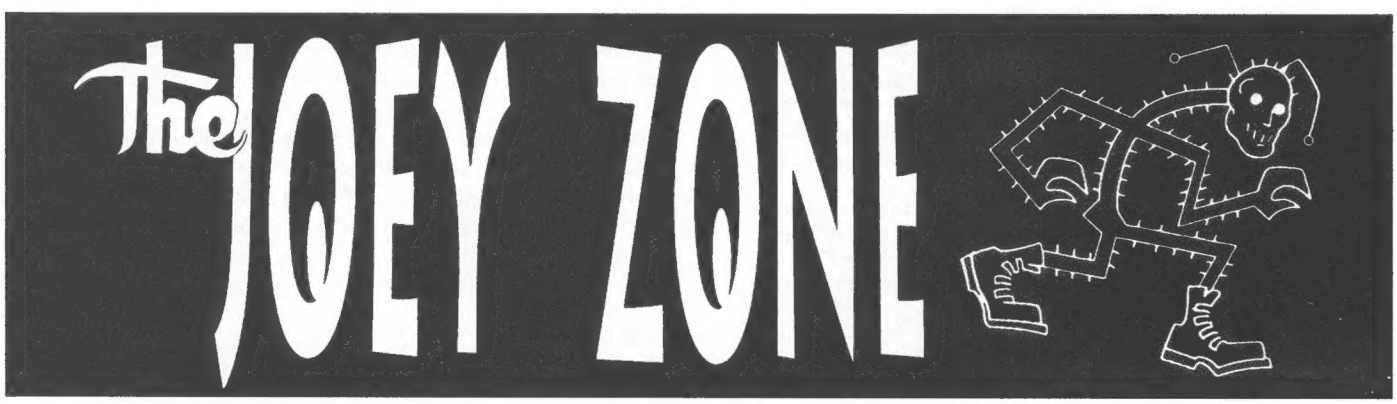
7) **Zines, Vol. I & II** (V-Search: 20 Romolo, #B, San Francisco, CA 94133, $18.99 & $14.99) is Vale's first solo effort since RE/Search split (Andrea's being *Angry Women in Rock, Vol. I,* Juno Books) and, as usual, is what we've come to expect from Vale—take a subject that's been beaten to death; show us an entirely more complete if not different perspective than ever on it; and then supply Trash Culture mavens like me with THE DEFINITIVE TEXT. Kinda bummed about the split, but I guess this means more books out from both, right?

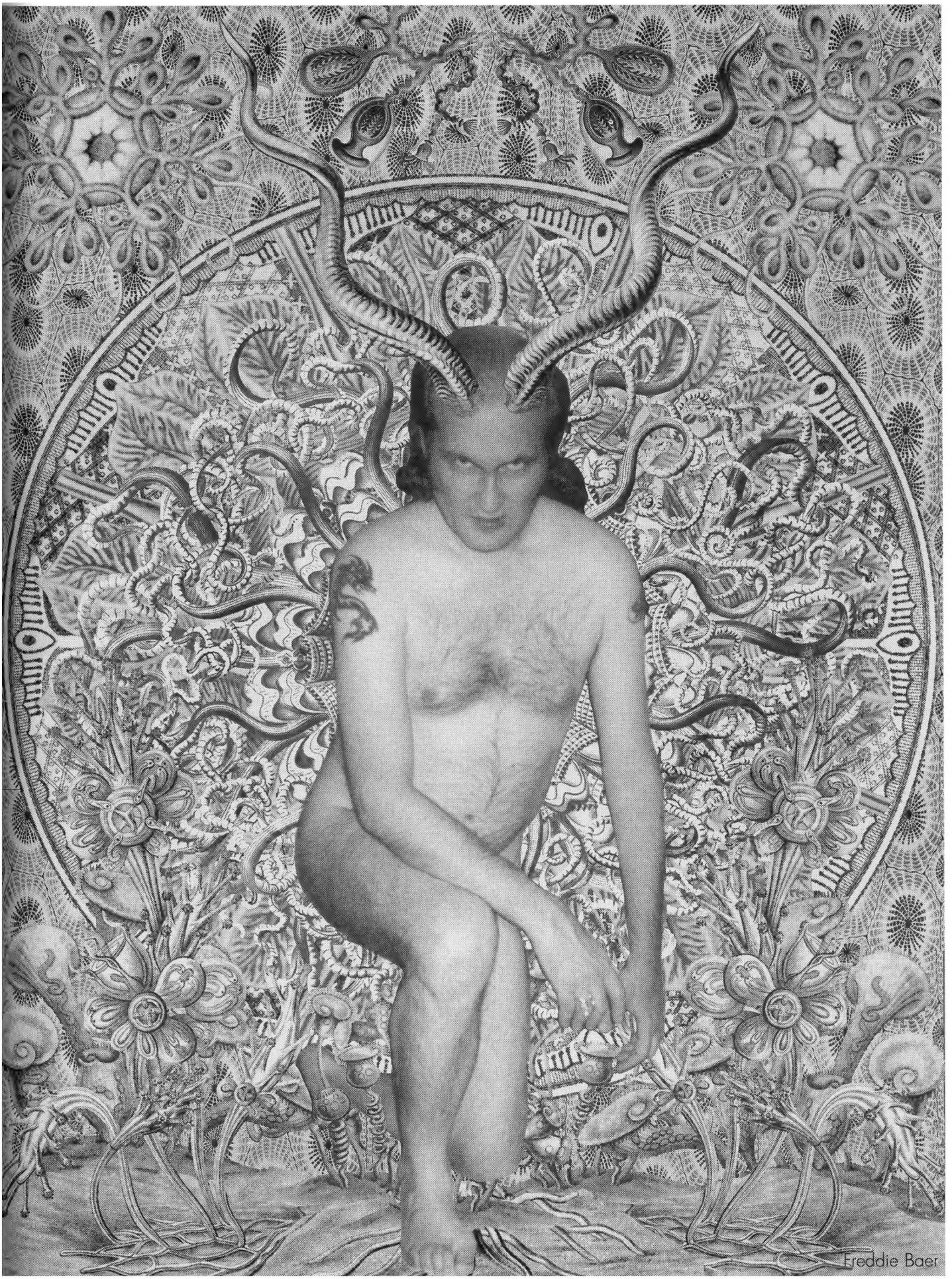
8) **Rollo**—Dutch animated pilot (1970) with art by Alan Aldridge and music by the 'Floyd. A boy and his bed's journey top the moon. Sounds like a Winsor McCay-vibe to me . . .

9) **Dark Arts Parlour** (5249 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood, CA, 91606, [818] 752-6080) showcases "Art Noir" by Miri Malmquist, René Cigler, Gomez, & R.H. Phister, among others (the last two being the proprietors). They've got a magazine ($6) & a catalog & they're just worth the trip in general.

And for those who still think the "SF" in SF EYE should stand for "scientifiction":

10) **Tangent** (5779 Norfleet, Raytown, MO 64133) is nowhere to be found in the superstores around these parts (Northeast US) so I guess I'll just have to make that $20 check out to Dave Truesdale now and spare myself the embarrassment of telling you everything that's hip secondhand. "The Only SF & Fantasy Short Fiction Review Magazine"'s real strength is in its columnists, ranging from archivist John Coker to that lovable living-Steadman-cartoon, Paul Riddell. Never mind the *Locus* . . .




Freddie Baer

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